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ISSN 0162-2188

Vol. 4, No. 12 (whole no. 34) December 1980

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EDITORIAL: What Makes Isaac Run?

by Isaac Asimov

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My good friend, Harlan Ellison, openly requests that no one bother sending him letters telling him how great he is because he just tosses them away without reading them.

That is an example of stoic nobility that I would follow if I could, but for me it would be hopeless to try. The sad fact is that I love letters telling me how great I am and I read them very carefully so as not to miss a single precious word.

You can imagine, then, how annoying it is to find in my mail, every once in a long while, a letter that does *not* tell me how great I am but, on the contrary, finds fault with me. When that happens, I look all about me carefully to make sure no one is watching; and if I am indeed unobserved, I tear up the letter and snarl and chafe.

And just the other day there came a letter that accused me of the crime of writing too much. This, apparently, was offensive to the letter-writer for two reasons, as nearly as I could tell. First, it showed in me an unlovely ambition and a despicable grasping for money and fame. Second, it was an artistic crime since, if I had the common decency to write less, or more slowly, or both, I might perhaps write good literature instead of the miserable stuff I crank out.

I sent my critic a polite note suggesting that he might suffer less if he stopped reading me, and I hope he follows my advice for I don't like to be the cause of misery for someone who may just possibly be a human being.

Yet it occurs to me that he may not be alone in his thoughts and that some of you, who don't write me, nevertheless have the feeling I write too much or too quickly or both. What you think of me, of course, matters only to me; but some of that impression you have may overflow onto the magazine that bears my name and that is another matter altogether. For the sake of the magazine I will have to explain myself.

To begin with, while I am a prolific writer, there are many prolific



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writers, especially among those who grew out of the pulp tradition as I did; and I set no records in that respect. There are a number of writers who have not only written more than I have—but have written more that I can possibly write if I live to extreme old age and carry on my present level of production to the very end.

(If you're curious about figures, I have published about 15,000,000 words in my lifetime altogether; but there are some writers who have published, in their lifetimes, anywhere from 40,000,000 to 100,000,000 words. There's no way in which I can approach these marks; and, believe me, I have no ambitions to try.)

Then what gives me my unusual reputation for prolificacy? Partly (perhaps entirely) it is because I spread my net wide. I not only have this monthly editorial, but I have a monthly science essay in *F & SF*, a monthly essay on the future in *American Way Magazine*, a monthly essay on science history in *SciQuest*, a monthly mystery in *Gallery*; and I appear less regularly in scores of other magazines. Then, too, my books, which are numerous in themselves, appear in a score of categories so that one librarian told me she found at least one book of mine in every major division of the Dewey Decimal classification.

The result is that people who are used to seeing me in one place or having me deal with one subject are very likely to run into me somewhere else, unexpectedly, dealing with something completely different. This astonishes them and makes them feel surrounded.

Under such circumstances, naturally, people get the impression that I'm setting a world record for writing and that I'm some sort of unbelievable prodigy. But I'm not! I'm just your garden variety of prolific writer.

To be sure, that, in itself, is considerable. By the time this editorial appears, the number of my books should be pushing 220—and even that relatively modest number (the world record, by a South African writer, is about 900) seems to puzzle people.

Why do I do it?

It does take considerable application of seat to chair and fingers to typewriter keys to turn all that out; and I do write very day, including Sundays and holidays, unless circumstances physically prevent me from doing so. Well, then, why?

Is it truly unlovely ambition and a lusting for money and fame?—Not so, and I can prove it. If I were desperate for money and fame I would channel my efforts into steamy sex novels or semi-mystic horror, or go to Hollywood. I could then do a lot less and get a lot more. To be sure, I might lack the talent for that sort of thing;

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but, if I wanted filthy lucre at all costs, I would at least *try* to do these things; and the fact is, I never have.

Well, then, if not that, what else? What makes Isaac run?

The answer is so simple that it always surprises me that no one guesses it. It surprises me even more that when I do tell people the answer, they find the utmost difficulty in believing it.

Here it is—I *like* it. I *enjoy* writing! I would rather write than anything else.

What's more, I write exactly what I like to write in exactly the way I like to write; and the fact that it has brought me money and fame (to some extent) is a fortunate accident. I don't either scorn the money and fame, nor do I refuse to accept it, but that's not what I was after.

I have lost count of the number of times people have said to me, "You must have *enormous* self-discipline to be able to stick at the typewriter day after day."

My answer is: "Not at all! If I had self-discipline I would move away from the typewriter now and then."

Once someone asked me, "If you had to give up either writing or sex, which would you choose to give up?"

My answer, delivered without hesitation, was, "I can type for twelve hours at a time without getting tired."

Barbara Walters, refusing to believe that I really liked writing all that much, asked me (off-camera), "What would you do if the doctor gave you only six months to live?"

My answer was, "Type faster!"

So in the end, they all say, "Well, you're a workaholic!"

Why? If I loved to play golf or tennis and did so every chance I got, I would be considered a good sport and a very loyal American. If I had a wood-working shop in my basement and amused myself in every idle hour turning out gadgets and furniture for the house, I would get medals.

But because what I like to do is *paid for*, I'm a workaholic.

If I typed and typed and typed and *didn't* get paid for it, then it would just be a hobby; and that would be all right no matter how much I worked at it, provided I also had some job which earned me a living and which I hated and did as skimpily and as sloppily as I could. Then I would be a worthy human being whom it would be an honor to know.

(I'm sorry if I sound a little bitter, but I *hate* being called a workaholic or being described as "compulsive.")

But how about the speed with which I write? Have I no feeling

for my art? Don't I want to do a good job, and wouldn't I turn out better stuff if I thought about it and considered it and weighed it in my mind and brooded over the first draft and revised it eighteen or nineteen times and compared the different versions carefully?

Maybe. I don't know. I've never tried it and I'm pretty sure I'm never going to try it. I can't.

Why can't I?

Let me ask you a question. Have you ever experienced an itch on your forearm? Am I correct in assuming you promptly scratched it?

Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps if you considered the itch, weighed carefully its location and intensity and thoughtfully took into account the various ways in which you might scratch it and the various instruments with which you might scratch it, you might end up—after fifteen or twenty minutes—in doing a more efficient and artistic job in removing that itch?

I'm sure nothing like that has ever occurred to you. You just scratch—as quickly and as thoroughly as you can.

Well, for me the desire to write is an itch. And I scratch!



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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

On Wings of Song by Thomas M. Disch, Bantam, \$2.25 (paper).
A Storm of Wings by M. John Harrison, Doubleday, \$8.95.
The Silver Sun by Nancy Springer, Pocket Books, \$2.50 (paper).
The Edge of Running Water by William Sloane, Del Rey, \$2.25 (paper).
The Butterfly Kid by Chester Anderson, Pocket Books, \$2.25 (paper).
The Erotic World of Faery by Maureen Duffy, Avon, \$3.50 (paper).
Aliens and Linguists by Walter E. Meyers, The University of Georgia Press, \$16.00.

As I was reading Thomas M. Disch's *On Wings of Song*, people kept asking me what I thought of it. (Disch is one of those authors people ask about because one is never quite sure what he's going to do next.) And I kept saying that I didn't know for sure, that I had to give it a few more pages. After I passed the half-way point of the book, this answer seemed a bit ridiculous, but I must say that even after finishing it, I'm still not sure whether I liked it or not. But I can certainly say that it's well worth reading.

Disch is not a likable writer—or to phrase that more felicitously, Disch's works are not likable works. If he specializes in anything, it's unpleasant futures, and that could even be refined to unpleasant *near* futures, which have a gritty reality and enough links to our present to give them a quality of *verismo* that makes for highly uncomfortable reading. Not for him the hip, comic-strip, "satirical" approach that has been fashionable for some time, with lots of amusing sex, violence, and drugginess (that "amusing" is sarcastic, if you hadn't guessed—I, for one, am heartily sick of that subgenre). Not that those matters are missing from Disch's work, but they have a different quality, a different emphasis. If there *is* such a thing as science fiction *verité*, Disch writes it. His 334, which I consider a masterpiece, is about as close to *Last Exit from Brooklyn* as the field has ever come.

On Wings of Song is also a near future, but differs from 334 in several ways. For one thing, the first half of the book takes place in a pastoral, rather than an urban setting, specifically the Midwest, more specifically Iowa. Here Disch, whom I think of as an urban writer, is obviously drawing on his childhood in Minnesota; and his 21st-century Midwest rings true. Most of the Bible belt states have

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become police states, fundamentalist Christians wield great influence, and farming is done more and more on enclaves that smack of the feudal estate.

For another, it's the second recent SF novel that uses music as an importantly intrinsic factor (the other—Card's *Songmaster*). Disch seems as involved with music as Arthur Clarke is with technology, and laces the novel with it as thoroughly as Clarke high-techs his works. Unfortunately, from my viewpoint, Disch chooses to concentrate in the second part of the book (which takes place in New York City) on opera. For me opera is the art for which I have the least sympathy, and what's worse, he specifically concentrates on *bel canto*, which of all forms of opera appeals to me the least. There were moments in the novel where I thought if I read one more word about opera I would scream (and why should I be different from the characters I was reading about?).

But generally, vocal music is functional in Disch's milieu—any kind of vocal music—since it, in combination with a deliberately unspecified electronic apparatus (made by Sony and other like firms), releases the spirit (soul? persona? ka?) of the user who sees himself as a tiny being with the ability to fly. The process is, in fact, called "flying" and the beings doing it are called "fairies." It is a highly desirable and euphoric state, and there is an objective reality about it—the wealthy, for instance, employ fairy traps to be sure that their privacy is not invaded.

Where 334 was a mosaic, *On Wings of Song* concentrates on one individual, a boy born in the restrictive Midwest whose major ambition is to fly. We see the various cultures of the time through his eyes; we see the U.S. sinking beneath "power failures, shortages, blizzards, floods and ever more audacious acts of terrorism." Against this all-too-real view of the future, Disch himself has the audacity to set the fantasy of "flying." Somehow he makes it work. Did I like the book? No, not really. Disch's characters as well as his settings are generally unpleasant, and I find the ending, which happens in the blink of an eye on the last page, unforgivably melodramatic. Nevertheless, I was never bored by it (save for a few moments of too much *bel canto*) and almost consistently intrigued by the author's amazing flow of inventiveness combined with reality. You don't have to like a work to think it's good.

Month before last, you'll remember, I devoted some space to the sudden spate of new novels which I labelled, for lack of a better term, "Baroque science fiction." One writer who certainly heralded

this style is M. John Harrison, particularly with his novel, *The Pastel City*. Now, with impeccable timing, a sequel to that ornate work has appeared. It is called *A Storm of Wings*, "being the second volume of the Viriconium sequence" (Viriconium is the name of the Pastel City).

As I made clear, I go for Baroque, but this one may be a little over-Baroque'd even for me. Harrison's writing is so elaborate that the plot and concepts often get totally lost in the complex giltwork. Metaphors and similes pepper the books; "like," "as if," "resembles," "with the air of," "the way that" are words and phrases encountered in almost every paragraph. The building sinks beneath its ornamentation; the theme is lost in arabesque and obligatto—to criticize in kind. In other words, it's easy to lose track of the plot.

Which is a simple one, luckily. Five inhabitants of the Pastel City (some of whom we have met before—it helps to have read the earlier book, and more recently than I have, which is at least five years ago), Cellur, the birdmaker; Galen Hornwrack, the assassin Lord; Alstath Fulthor, the Reborn Man; Fay Glass, the mad Reborn Woman; and Tomb, the Iron Dwarf, leave the city to investigate the reports of giant insects from the hinterlands and their links to the mysterious cult, the Sign of the Locust, at the behest of Queen Jane. What they eventually find is an insectoid invasion from Outer Space (shades of '50s movies!).

That's reducing it to the most simple-minded of levels, and I must say, despite my grumbling (which is really more of a warning to the unpersistent lover of fast-paced narratives), Harrison has made a wondrous thing of this tale of the Evening of Earth. Reading it *was* a struggle, I must admit, but I have the disadvantage—to myself and sometimes to authors—of having to read against a deadline. *A Storm of Wings* should be read slowly, carefully—and perhaps immediately again, something I have never suggested before. It will amply repay the effort.

I usually don't touch on sequels or spinoffs, an arbitrary rule that is perhaps unfair but is one of the ways that I keep the candidacy for coverage to somewhat manageable proportions. I talked about the Harrison because his works are so few and far between that ignoring this one might mean several more years before I had another chance to mention him. And I'd like to talk about Nancy Springer's *The Silver Sun* for two reasons: one is that I liked the first book of this proposed trilogy (*The White Hart*) so very much, the other is that some clarification is needed about the new book.

Springer's first novel was *The Book of Suns*, which attracted little, if any, notice. Her second, *The White Hart*, caused some stir, however, as an example of heroic fantasy with quite a bit of originality. The new book, *The Silver Sun*, is not new; it is a rewrite of *The Book of Suns*, integrating it more closely with *The White Hart*, I gather (I didn't read the original version).

It is laid in the land of Isle, in a very different era from that of *The White Hart*. Isle is very like the England of *Ivanhoe* at this period, with foreign invaders settling in several generations after the conquest, and the conflict is very like that of *Ivanhoe*, with villainous "new" overloads, heroic "old" families, and a fair amount of both factions in between, simply wanting peace and quiet. In place of *Ivanhoe*'s outcast race of Jews, Springer introduces a sort of lost colony of elves.

I wasn't quite so happy with this one as I was with *The White Hart*. There are two heroes and two heroines, and almost everybody is so noble and nice that as a cumulative effect by the end of the book I wanted to strangle all of them. Even half the villains are subject to about-faces and become sympathetic. Nevertheless, it is a rich (if sometimes monotonous) tapestry, and I will certainly give the third book a chance.

One of my real weaknesses is a propensity for novels of the 1920s and '30s of a sort that I find difficult to categorize. But from A. Merritt to Thorne Smith, they share a quality that I associate with curling up in an armchair before the fire and having (oh, dreadful expression) "a good read."

So I plunged into *The Edge of Running Water* by William Sloane with a good deal of anticipation; I'd known the title (an intriguing one) for many years though I'd never read it, and it had been first published in 1939.

The book went swimmingly for a while. Young scientist-teacher summoned by his old mentor to isolated area of Maine; mysterious house with even more mysterious room in it; mentor's lovely young sister-in-law to hand as well as strange psychic lady; problems with local population, etc. But this time I was thrown a curve; all this leads up to the most crashing anticlimax I may ever have encountered in all my days of reading. In this case, don't go near the water.

Science fiction having been a cult genre for most of its history, it hasn't had that much chance to develop individual cult novels. One that has come close, however, is Chester Anderson's *The But-*

terfly Kid, first published back in 1967. It's finally reappeared in paperback, and I'm happy to say it's just as slapstickily wacko as I remember it.

For anyone who lived through the 1960s, particularly those who did so in Greenwich Village, the novel is instant nostalgia. It's set vaguely in the future, but all futures reflect the period in which they're extrapolated, and this one is unabashedly an extension of that time and place, a sort of Flower Summer with vidiphones. Anderson has his Village geography down pat, too; in fact, one dizzy scene takes place in the very building in which this report is being written (my apartment building is a converted police precinct house). And the dialogue is rife with quaint old expressions such as "groovy" and "oh, wow!"; the miracle is that Anderson, writing at the time, found them as funny then as we do now.

The plot, so far as one can discern it through the general chaos, has to do with a new drug that appears on the scene, which makes hallucinations into reality. It first impinges on the consciousness of our hippie hero (one Chester Anderson) in the person of a teenybopper who is making butterflies—real ones, though psychedelically colored—with a wave of his hand. This turns out to be part of a plot by a group of aliens, who resemble six-foot-tall blue lobsters, to take over the Earth, and the whole thing comes to an epic climax at the Croton Reservoir with a battle using the reality drug as a weapon. *The Butterfly Kid* is a thoroughgoing delight, and I am more than happy to welcome it back in print.

And finally, two academic books that are of more than routine interest. In cases like these, I am not about to criticize or question the special areas of expertise; I can only report on the general readability of the volume which, in the case of both of these, is very.

Maureen Duffy's *The Erotic World of Faery* is fascinating if you don't mind having some romantic illusions brought down around your ears as she points out the subliminal sexuality of fairy tales, fantasies, and even, in a final chapter, some selected works of SF (with that chapter, appropriately enough, headed by a quote from Asimov). Kingsley's *The Water Babies* is an anti-masturbation tract; in *The Wind in the Willows* the "three hero animals of the river bank are three recognizable phallic or fool types," and you can just imagine what she makes of that Freudian festival, *Peter Pan*.

A little less sensational, but just as intriguing, is Walter E. Meyers's *Aliens and Linguists*. It's a study of manufactured words and nomenclature, communication, and linguistics in general in science

fiction (though with a suitable nod to Tolkien, the master of them all in the matter of etymology, for obvious reasons).

I was particularly impressed with Meyers's knowledge of SF, which is demonstrated to be extensive; most academics, even those who claim to know the field, seem to think that it consists of *1984*, *Brave New World*, and *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Bravo, Mr. Meyers! (And Ms. Duffy, too, for that matter.)



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BLOODSONG

by Barry B. Longyear & Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

art: Hilary Barta





When the Messrs. Longyear and O'Donnell discovered they'd both written stories based on the same idea ("The Raindrop's Rôle" and "Savage Planet"), they decided to try a deliberate collaboration—which, we think, turned out quite well.

Dwai's talons scratched the rock to which they were chained. He could not loosen the bolts, not with his wrists lashed to his neck. Nor could he snap his three-meter pinions and fly off with the anchor. He'd tried that all night long; blood still oozed from the scrapes on his legs. With an angry cluck, he wrapped himself in the warmth of his wings and waited for his trial to begin.

Brooding, he knew he'd be convicted. The balance had collapsed. The harmony—oh gods of storm, the harmony!—had jangled into discord. And he, he . . .

He could remember the smoothness, the poise, the instinctive interplay. Not a season ago he had perched on a blasted stump and chatted with a friend. That was what Poets did: chatted, made art, philosophized . . . they had created civilization, and they carried it on in all its aspects. The Hunters, on the other hand, fed them, and protected them from attack. But it was a clear, windless day, so the Poet sat up top, while the Hunter slumbered below, awaiting the neural flash, the synaptic summons.

Poet Dwai had proposed a theory, which his friend was ridiculing. "No, hear me out!" he insisted. "The herdbeasts are fewer each year—a fact you acknowledge—and the reason, I say, is that we grow more numerous. We eat more of them. To extrapolate their extinction is—"

"—the raving of a demented mind," snapped Khu'a. Poets were expected to insult each other freely—and did. "Logic states that if fewer graze here, more graze there." He waved a nightblack wing in the direction of the eastern mountains. "Nature maintains an equilibrium—"

"—which we overturned with our weapons!" Dwai cut in. "Soon the ngah will all be gone—unless we act now to feed them, and to defend them against the groundclaws who would also eat them. Not to see this is to be blind!"

"To state it is to be a fool!" said Khu'a hotly. "Tradition says—"

"Reality shows—"

"Dwai, you idiot, you've soared too high too long, and I think your brain died of frost!"

He tossed up his beak and laughed. His friend had to join in; it was well-known that Khu'a spent twice as much time above the moon-silvered clouds as any other member of the flock. Then the corner of his eye touched a furry paw. He froze. His feathers bristled. The balance beam tilted and the Hunter popped into control. "Ground-claw!" he hissed, touching his cree.

Hunter Khu'a emerged with a flourish of talons. "Now?" he grated. "Now!" and they struck. Dwai swooped towards the beast's fanged face. As its massive paw swung up to bat him down, he flared his wings and floated above its head, just out of reach, yet close enough to tempt its hungry eyes. It reared onto its hind legs—and Khu'a darted through to rip out its throat.

Blood still bubbled as they settled back to their perch; they smoothed their feathers and wiped clean their beaks. Danger had passed. All was quiet. "Good work," the Hunters grunted, then—after a last, sharp glance around—slipped back into dormancy. The Poets said, "Where were we. . . ?"

The chains clanked together; he returned to the present. He had, indeed, known harmony—no matter what happened at dawn, he had once been whole.

A minute later, sunlight spilled over the valley rim, startling the flock out of sleep. Nestlings hopped and squawked while their mothers sought to feed them. Older children launched themselves into the air and spiraled upwards on drafts of pure exhilaration.

Four formed a diamond and whistled past overhead, synchronizing the beats of wings so closely-spaced that feathers brushed on each stroke. It was a Poet's sport, but even a Hunter could appreciate their coordination—and their faith in each other. They sang as they flew. It was a light song, a mock lament that they'd grown old enough to feed themselves—and it cut off abruptly. The diamond burst open; short knives flashed in the sun. They'd spotted breakfast. As silent as night the Hunters dropped, talons first, and vanished beyond the shoulder of a ridge. A dart-pierced *ngah* bleated in pain, but death quieted it. The foursome screeched success.

And seven mild elders approached Dwai.

He preened himself, for he would not cower. Larger than most Grai-Grai, and feathered a shimmering blue-green that faded subtly into gold at the crest, he took pride in appearance and dignity. He had nothing else, not any more. The prying alien woman had taken

all his life but his stature and his style. Those would have to be his weapons against the elders.

They halted just out of reach, and jostled into a semi-circle of peering, bobbing faces. Trhu, the chief, so ancient that only a single scarlet plume adorned his crest, spoke in a meek, whistly voice: "You are Hunter Dwai?"

"You know I am," he rasped.

"Kill for us, Hunter Dwai." He nodded to middle-aged Skwee, who threw a hairy brown thing at the captive. It whimpered as it tumbled head over tail.

Bound though he was, Dwai struck. Instinct whipped his hooked beak through the air, and bit the small mammal in half. Hot blood gushed on his bony cheekplates; its perfume triggered his hunger. Pecking at the ground, he caught the *thwan's* tail, jerked his head up, and swallowed that half of the carcass whole.

"Now," wheezed Trhu, "sing of sadness, Poet Dwai."

"Sing?" Gobbling the rest of the *thwan*, he stretched his neck to get it down. He felt strong, and tested his chains. They held. "I don't sing." Wistfulness welled in him briefly, but he forced its lament into darkness with: "Though I hunt and kill and eat—I don't sing."

"This is your last chance, Poet Dwai—"

"I am *Hunter Dwai!*" he screeched, bending forward and slapping his wingtips together under the old one's very beak. "Hunter. Do you hear?"

"We hear," said Trhu quietly. The black beads of his eyes fixed on one elder after another until all had voted with a crestripple or a talonslash. "You are insane, Hunter Dwai, sickened with irrevocably separated personalities. One's beings must fit like the halves of a broken shell; one's beings must ebb and flow with the tide of need. Yours are separate. You can't call the poet; he can't call you. We fear you, Hunter, as your wife did when she accused you to us. Your sensitivity comes when fury is needed. You rage when you should be gentle. You must leave before you hurt the flock."

"Untie me," he sneered, "and see if I roost on cowards' ledge."

"We will. But first: should you wish to return, you must heal yourself. And you must benefit us, to compensate for the disruption you have caused. Find the alien, drive it away. Re-shape the nest of your soul. Then you may return."

"I am a hunter," he snarled, though deep within him a distant flautist piped a doleful refrain, "and I compensate no one. If I make the alien my quarry, it is for my own amusement, not for your

benefit. Untie me."

Trhu nodded, and whispered, "Gentlemen poets, let us be hunters."

The elders stiffened. Statue-still, they swelled and stretched; their feathers bristled while their hands fisted and their talons lengthened visibly. They they moved—with swift, jerky strides. Each gesture spoke of controlled ferocity, of sudden death.

Skwee unlocked the fetters. For an instant he tensed, nearly goaded to murder by the smell and sight of blood, but he shuddered, and backed away. Trhu bit through the rope looped around Dwai's wrists and neck. "Go!" he commanded, in a growl more vicious than his age should have permitted. "Go! Your weapons are on the peak."

Dwai measured the seven elders as he flexed his arms. Free now, he almost lashed out at them. He ached to tear their flesh with his claws, to rip his beak through their throats . . . but even to him the idea seemed mad. A seven-to-one fight would end quickly, indeed. "I'll go," he grated, flapping his wings and lifting off, "but don't expect me back."

On the peak, Poet Dwai crossed his arms and spread his wings until their tips brushed the rocks. Eyes shut, his beak rose, opened, then issued a high-pitched wail. As the sound echoed from the surrounding mountains, he hung his head, then shook it to remove the taste from his mouth. "You have been at your work again, Hunter."

A flame burned inside his breast, but Dwai whirled about, his wingtips knocking small stones from their places, into the depths below. "I am the stronger, now, Hunter! I!" The flame subsided, and Dwai became still, his keen eyes studying the site of his flock far below. He turned and saw the ragged-edged blade of the *cree* on the rocks, next to a short-knife and a quiver of darts. Dwai nodded, then threw back his head and cooed a bitter laugh.

"Hunter, you are a fool! You would not release me even to spare us this shame." He studied the weapons for a moment, then looked to the gathering clouds. "Can you hate me so much, Hunter? To have us thrown from the bosom of our flock?" Dwai snorted. "Creature of blood, of kill lust, thou knowest not the meaning of hate! Love has given me a hate that even you, in all your brutality, cannot equal."

Dwai's breast swelled. "You are quiet, Hunter. Is it because you feel my flame? It is a fire born in love for the woman—" He doubled over as a pain seared his spine. "—Yes! Love that has made my hate the stronger! Get back! Get back!"

Dwai came upright, then he shuddered. He turned and looked down at the flock's roost. "It is just as well. Could the lady who finds my art a thing of grace and beauty feel joy in the company of . . . *animals!*"

He thought of the delicate, fragile creature who listened to his songs and poems, her strange face a thing of curiosity, yet even beauty. Then he would listen to the poems she talked through the shiny green box with the glowing jewels. "Love, Hunter. You will never know it. Does it make you feel as crippled as I see you?"

He spread his wings, then dropped from the peak, swooping until his wings caught a warm column of air. Dwai circled it until he had risen high above the peak. His sharp eyes saw the members of his flock gliding below, plummeting down that strong talons might rip the backs of helpless *thwans*. The song rose to his throat:

*"I spread my wings, and pray you hold me
God of sky;
Your children of the clouds see my flight.
Bid them let me pass.
God of mountains, God of sun, God of stars,
Guide my way.
For now I fly."*

Dwai saw the glint of the weapons still on the peak below. "Look at them, Hunter, for there they shall remain. I need no weapons to go and meet my lady."

He banked, toward the sun, then pushed his wings against the currents, leaving the peak behind.

The Hunter burst awake, spurting into consciousness and control like magma jetting up a volcanic fissure.

Knocked off balance by his erupting skullmate, the Poet tumbled down the slope into darkness and subterranean stasis. There would he float, unknowing and unknown, until his desire for the light so intensified the pressure of his personality that he, too, could shoot to the surface, scooping up the nuggets of musculature and mentation as he fountained.

Discords jangled in the inner air; the Hunter winced. He'd have no more of that foolishness. That prissy nestling would stay buried, this time.

Soaring on a thermal, he circled the alien's landing site. She'd chosen a treeless plateau, flat and grassy. Her craft had cut three

parallel lines into its surface. From a kilometer up, the metal-skinned air blower didn't look so big—if you thought you were much lower. Sunset tinged its stubby wings red; the breeze flattened the tall grass around its large black wheels. The woman emerged, and held to her eyes the glass-tipped tubes that gave her the vision of an old nest guard. She pointed them at Hunter Dwai, and waved.

Not deigning to respond, he continued his long slow circle. He studied her as he would a *ngah* separated from the herd, noting her stance and walk, estimating her speed and strength, searching for anything on her person or close to her hand that she could use as a weapon.

She was vulnerable.

Wheeling, more silent than the air that bore him, he hated her. She had ruined him with her jeweled boxes, had lashed his brain with such pain that he'd lost his talongrip on the Poet, who'd ever since fluttered just out of reach, even when mired down under.

The Hunter had been under that hour. Perched in hooded pride on the ledge of their soul, he'd listened to the Poet babble to the alien, and awaited danger.

High above the waving woman, he laughed softly.

Danger. It triggered fear in the Poet, always and without fail. That fear dropped on the little nestling like a great weight, swinging him under, and launching the Hunter into the light. Always . . . except that once.

He banked again. The center of his circle moved fifty more meters away from the air-blower. As he'd hoped, the maneuver lured her further into the open. She looked over her shoulder to mark the precipice.

Yes, the Hunter had stayed under that hour because the Poet had been too foolish to recognize danger. She had hypnotized him, perhaps with the impossibly slender golden feathers she called hair, perhaps with the lake-blue eyes that saw so little they begged for help. The Hunter, eavesdropping, had waited for the see-saw to tip, to toss him gape-beaked to their defense. But the Poet had chuckled fatuously and let her attach the wires.

She stood alone on the plain, her shadow stretching long and grey down the green. The breeze drew her hair across her face, and flapped the long-tipped collar of her jumpsuit. Her five-fingered hands clutched the binoculars more tightly.

The Hunter wondered if five fingers were better than three, if five fingers held the short-knife more firmly at the moment of thrust. And he cursed the Poet for abandoning their own weapons, because

now he'd have to soil his talons.

The woman had destroyed him. "Fascinating!" she'd burred to the Poet. "Oh, *please* let me measure it." She'd brought out her boxes, her wires. And the Poet had bowed his head, not knowing (for if he had, the Hunter would have, too) that she would break the birth-bond, snap the see-saw.

Even in memory the Hunter sobbed at the psychic pain.

Arrogant Poet, he thought, riding up top when danger lurked, riding through the hour of the Hunter. A minor-key dirge sounded faint and far within. You call it love, what you feel for this woman, this alien thing, this cree that has cleft us. I call it madness to split the birth-bond, to shrug off symbiosis. You needed me and I you, skull-brother, but you thought to seize our body for yourself. Can you hear me, prissy nestling?

Angry music drowned the wind.

Ah, you can. Well, hear this, glosswing—you chose to fight for dominance, but you chose the wrong foe. I am Hunter. I hate. And I kill.

The sun slipped behind the far ridges, casting the plateau into darkness. To him it made no difference—he could see as well at night as in the day—but to her it meant death.

His hatred for her crackled and flared like the fire on a tree torched by lightning. He flexed his talons. So sharp, so strong. Like the lightning, he stabbed down.

And she, the silly fool, smiled.

As Dwai plummeted, the Poet struggled, but too strong was the Hunter. Closer, almost upon her, and the smile left the woman's lips. She turned to flee, then fell, screaming, to the ground. *No! Hunter, No!* Poet Dwai's mind-being flew at the hard wall of killfire constructed by the Hunter. *No! I beg you, no!* Closer, then Dwai extended his talons, dipped, then raked the woman's back. Her screaming ended suddenly.

As Dwai banked to finish his quarry, the crazed Poet flew at the Hunter, at first confusing him, then driving the brute into the darkness. The Poet Dwai screamed, "I begged you! I begged you!" He whirled down, landing eight wingspans from her bleeding body. He wrapped his wings about himself, shivered, then stared at the body with unblinking eyes.

*"Emptiness,
My soul a haunt*

*For naught
But filmy wisps
Of memory."*

He closed his eyes and lowered his beak to his breast. Then the woman moaned. Poet Dwai's head rose, then he flapped and ran to her side. He caught his breath as he saw the six bloody cuts that extended from the small of her back to her shoulders. The tatters of her jumpsuit soaked red. But—she moved. She lived! He bent over.

"Lady. Lady, can you hear me?"

She moaned again, but did not open her eyes. Dwai pushed aside a few scraps of cloth from her back and examined the wounds. They bled, and badly. Up he jumped, his wings catching the air, his eyes searching the ground for the healing-plant. Farther and farther he circled, until a familiar orange patch came into view. He swooped down, his talons ripping loose several plants, then up he went to bank, glide, then put down at the woman's side. He pulled several of the pods from the plants, held them over her back, then squeezed, letting the sour-smelling liquid dribble into the wounds. In moments, the cuts turned black and stopped bleeding. Dwai placed his arms under her, keeping clear of the healing wounds, then gently lifted her. He spread his wings and moved toward the lady's air-blower.

In the cabin of the air-blower, Poet Dwai crouched next to the lady's sleeping place. The healing-plant had stopped the pain, and her face was calm. Dwai lifted an arm and stroked her cheek with his fingers. He turned the hand and looked at it, then let it fall to his side.

"Hunter, we must come to terms. I know not how much longer I can hold you in the darkness, but before she is healed, you will again control us."

He stood and began searching the lockers in the compartment. "Yes, you will control us; but you shall not kill her, Hunter. You shall tend her. If she wishes water, you shall bring it. If enemies come to the door, you shall fight them off." Poet Dwai nodded. "And, Hunter, if she is moved to have her jeweled box talk the poems, you shall sit and listen."

Opening a large locker at the rear of the compartment, he nodded and pulled out the long knife the woman had called a machete, looking much like a *cree* but with a smooth-edged blade. He placed

the long knife on the counter of the compartment's tiny cooking place.

"You shall do these things, Hunter, because I tell you to do them." Dwai removed the cover to the lady's fire plates, then pushed the small panel the way he had once seen her do. In seconds, one of the fire plates glowed red. Dwai felt the heat on his face, then he reached and picked up the long knife in his right hand. "I must leave you a message, both to tell you what I would have you do, and to show you what I am capable of if you fail me."

"Are you listening, Hunter?" Dwai felt the fire throbbing within his breast. "Good, Hunter; then sharpen your hearing, and mind well what I now say: you mistake bloodlust for courage. You mistake song for weakness. Had you the wit to compose, you would see what true courage is." Dwai stared at the fire plate, now glowing white. He placed his left forearm on the counter, lifted the long-knife high over his head, then swung the blade down against his wrist. He staggered back, dropping the blade, blood spurting from the useless stump where his left hand had been. "See . . . see Hunter . . ." Dwai rocked forward, coming to a halt next to the cooking place. He lifted the stump and placed it directly on the white fire plate. He screamed, the smell of burning flesh invading his head and lungs, the pain slamming at the insides of his head.

He slumped to the floor, looking at the lady through half-closed eyes. "You see, Hunter? I can make you fit to hunt nothing more than ground grubs, if I choose. Or I can end us, which I shall do should I awaken and find my lady dead."

He saw her open her eyes. She rocked her head until she saw him crumpled on the floor, then her eyes widened. "Have . . . have no fear, my . . . lady." He breathed hard, then felt the compartment darken and begin spinning. "The Hunter . . . will mind himself." He closed his eyes and let the darkness take him from his agony.

The Hunter rose to a consciousness that simmered with anguish. Ascending, he felt it, but broke through to rise above it, as all Hunters could. Though it did not disappear from his awareness, it bubbled below his threshold of pain, on a sub-sensory level he could dip into to check or ignore, if he chose.

He chose to ignore it.

Pale, unreal light filled the bare room. Yawning in the stale air, ruffling straight the feathers bent by sleep, he opened his wings to examine the wound.

And hissed at the sight of the charred, swollen stump.

You fool! he threw inwards, hoping the Poet was listening. *I was the strongest, the bravest—you've made me a nest guard decades before my time. What did you hope to prove? It'll be a week before I find my new flight balance.*

"Good morning," whistled a harsh, alien voice. No Grai-Grai, not even the most senile, could consider that raspy screech a proper greeting for the dawn.

Talons clicking on the shiny floor, the Hunter pivoted, knowing he would face a slender, blue-eyed, female Terran. His nerves told him that the fingers of his missing left hand had curled into a fist. "You!" he spat at the drawn woman leaning on the doorjamb.

"Of course, Dwai." Her lips moved, but the words came from the box strapped to her neck. "Who— oh. You are Hunter Dwai, not the Poet."

"That's right," he snarled, and fought down the urge to slash her pink cheeks. "That prissy nestling mutilated our body and now he's afraid to come out. Can't stand the pain. Glosswings are like that. Although where this one got the guts to cripple us is beyond me." He cocked his head and snapped his beak reflectively. Studying her soft nose and exposed ears, he added, "And why he's obsessed with you is beyond me, too."

"Now just a minute," she began—

But he cut her off. "No. The Poet might listen to you, but I don't. You're the one who caused this whole mess, and I'm not about to forget it."

"Caused?" she echoed blankly. "Mess?"

He advanced a step, half-unfurling his wings. The walls cramped him; the ceiling confined him. Claustrophobia fueled his fury. "Yes, ground grabber, *caused*. You and your boxes. 'Oh, *please* let me measure it—it won't hurt a bit.' Well, it did! It tore us apart! And because of that we were deflocked, the prissy nestling's gone crazy—" He waved his stump. "—I am a cripple, and it. Is. All. Your. Fault." If he'd had room for a hop and flutter, he'd have disemboweled her on the spot.

Angry, ominous chords crashed and whirled within.

Shut up, poet.

The music swelled and whirled like an oncoming tornado.

Listen, windthroat, I'm in charge now.

The notes solidified, and hurled themselves at his underside—but slammed into the roiling pain. They dopplered down and away.

You can't even function up top today—so sink back into the ooze and SHUT UP!

Insistent, the refrain demanded obedience.

All right, I'll let her live—for a while.

No, forever! screamed the music. *Or else—*

Don't threaten me, glosswing. Because after what you did, I'm not so sure I don't want to die. Keep pushing and I'll tear out her throat—then let you swing up top and commit suicide. Why not? What kind of life have you left me?

Silence filled his interior—shaken, reconsidering silence.

That's better. He lifted his bony head and stared at the woman.

"As for you—why are you here, anyway?"

"I—" Her cheeks reddened, and she half-hid her face behind a toss of blond hair. "I'm fleeing," she said simply.

"You made somebody else hate you?" he mocked.

She caught her breath. "No," she said at last, exhaling slowly.

"No, that's . . . well, it's true, but—"

Despite his animosity, he found her intriguing. "How can something be yes and no at the same time?"

"They don't hate me," she said softly, "they merely want to kill me."

He studied her anew. "Why? Are you their food?"

"Food?" Her eyes blinked several times. "No, why?"

"If they don't hate, why else would they kill except to sate hunger?"

She laughed shakily. "I have to remember you're the Hunter . . . no, it's what I know that makes them want to kill me."

"What's that?"

She drew up her spine like a prophet imparting revelation. "That the Grai-Grai are intelligent—and should not be slaughtered."

"Of course we're intelligent—who could feel otherwise?"

The woman sagged against the gleaming wall. Greyness suffused her skin. "Believe me, Dwai, there are many of my race who would classify you as an animal."

The Hunter shrugged. "Anything that lives and breathes and kills is an animal, but—"

"No," she broke in, "that's not the definition they use—I had no idea you were so articulate; the Poet said—"

"What definition do they use, and how does slaughter enter into it?"

"To them—" She set her jaw tightly, as if to hold back nausea—"anything that isn't identical to us is an animal—especially civilizations that don't lavish their creativity on tool-making."

"Our short knives and *crees* aren't tools?"

"You're very proud." She raised her thin hands to her temples, then winced as the motion stretched the lacerated areas of her back. "Dwai, you don't need to convince *me*—I'm on your side as it is—it's the others who don't believe."

"Who are these others?" he asked suspiciously.

"People—humans—they look like me; my race. But they're in charge of deciding which worlds we will take, and which we will leave for the . . . the natives."

In a vague way, he understood. His people, too, had elders who picked new nesting grounds—although they never would have settled on a ledge without consulting the established flocks in the vicinity. "So your people are planning to take the world from the Grai-Grai?"

She nodded; then at his apparent incomprehension said, "Yes."

He longed to stretch his wings, to float up warm winds rising from rocky slopes while he thought things out. "But why are you telling me this?" he demanded. "You should have discussed it with the Poet—it's the sort of thing he and his like are good for."

"I—" Again her cheeks flamed, and she glanced away in embarrassment. "I didn't want to talk about it unless I had to. It . . . it's shameful, if you know what I mean."

He snorted. "And now you have to? Why, because the Hunter is here?"

"No," she said softly, plaintively. "Because my hunters are here."

Before he could respond, a fanfare of martial trumpets blasted him off his perch and back down under.

The Poet's anger shot to the surface. "Shameful?! You speak of shame?"

The woman cowered against the bulkhead. "Hunter Dwai, I only—"

"The Hunter is gone, lady. The one you betrayed speaks now. Explain! Explain, else my talons shall do the Hunter's work upon you!"

She held out her hands. "Poet, don't you remember the songs you sang to me, and the poems—"

"What for? Why did you have me sing for you?"

She swallowed, then looked down. "My job. It was my job."

The Poet thrashed his wings in fury. "Job? You mean your work? It was your work to have me sing?"

She nodded. "The recordings would prove the Grai-Grai to be intelligent."

The Poet was without words. Things within his breast tightened,

and the corners of his mouth watered. "I . . . I *loved* you!" He grabbed her chin with his right hand and forced her to look into his face. "We had art, poetry, and song together, and . . . I *loved* you! You . . . *loved* me! Your jeweled box sang your love to me! I heard the songs! You *love* me!"

Tears welled in her eyes as she nodded. "Dwai, those were the poems of other humans. I . . . thought you'd enjoy them."

Poet Dwai turned from the creature and went to the vehicle's hatch. "You have your information, creature. Why do you not take it to your masters? I have been used; are you not yet done with me?"

She looked down at the deck without seeing it. "I do have an . . . affection for you, Dwai—"

The Poet snorted. "Affection!"

"It's true!" She shook her head as she continued to keep her eyes down. "It's true. But . . . we could never *love*, Dwai. Look at us." She returned her gaze to the Poet. "Look at us!"

He returned his gaze to the lady, the wetness streaming from her reddened eyes. "I am looking, yet as I looked before, and before I *loved* you!"

She held out her hands. "We are different. How could we ever love?"

Dwai staggered back as though he had been struck. "You talk . . . you talk of *rutting*, not *love*!" He felt his good hand itch to strike the creature. He breathed deeply, then tossed his head to the right. "I would sing to you and tell you my poems, then you would sing and tell me yours." He looked back at her. "*That* was love."

She shook her head. "Those were not my songs and poems, Dwai. They were simply recordings. I wanted to see what they would inspire in you. The works of other poets—human poets—were transcribed—"

Poet Dwai turned back to the hatch. "Then your work is done. Why do you not take yourself and leave?"

"Dwai, there are powerful interests that would see my work fail. Don't you understand? If all that I have found out isn't brought to the proper people, the Grai-Grai will be destroyed. This planet will belong to others. My ship won't fly. I've sent out a distress call, but those who would command this planet will have heard the call as well."

Dwai folded his wings about his shoulders. "Of what interest is this to me?"

"If they kill me, your race will die."

The Poet watched as a small air blower settled to the edge of the

plateau. "Another craft comes, lady. Your rescuers are here."

"The color. What color is it?"

"Blue." Dwai turned back to see the creature holding her hands to her mouth.

"It's them! Dwai, they will kill me! Please, please help me."

Dwai looked at the new air blower and watched as six of the human creatures emerged carrying weapons. He turned back and saw the lady struggle to her feet, move to a locker, then remove a deadly-looking hand weapon. She picked it up and extended her hand toward Dwai. "This weapon, lady, how does it work?"

"Hold it in your hand, point it at them, then depress the lever."

Dwai frowned, picked up the machete, thrust it into his belt, then he took the weapon from the lady. He studied it for a moment, then looked at the approaching creatures. It did not take the Hunter to see that the creatures were exposed and careless. He pointed the weapon out of the hatch, aimed it at one of the creatures, then depressed the lever. One of the creatures fell to the ground in flames, while the remaining five dove for cover. The Poet felt the sickness coming over him.

Hunter . . . Hunter, I need you to fight. And you will need me as well to know who to fight and why. I am still strong, Hunter, and cannot be forced back. But I am releasing you, for we must do this thing together.

The Hunter burned up from the darkness to find the Poet still in residence. *Down, glosswing!*

No, Hunter, for we must work as one. The enemy is out there. If they are not killed, the Grai-Grai die.

Your alien woman caused this. Let her die, first.

No!

Poet, she plucked our tail feathers while you slept—how can you protect a ground-grabber who made a fool out of you?

Hunter, look into my memory. Hear what chants there.

Your memory? he snorted. *I suppose they're your eyes, too?*

Please?

Oh, all right. He peered into the misty curtain of music that hung between them, cutting one off from the other. Only amorphous grey met his gaze—but before he could protest that the Poet had asked him to do the impossible, the clouds parted, as if sundered by strong wind and brilliant sun. Up the far side of the curtain licked flames, and beyond them . . . beyond them played a masterful symphony of love aroused, elated—and betrayed. The brass shouted joy, the bass spoke of strength and depth and force, and the flutes . . . ah, the

lonely flutes mourned. The Hunter looked upon a wounded comrade fluttering from the sky's ceiling to the waiting teeth of rock and ridge, helpless to save himself. The Hunter watched . . . and wept. *She broke your wings, he whispered, and you still protect her?*

Look deeper, Hunter. Listen closer.

The rhythm shifted; the fifes shrieked *Alarum, alarum!* In staccato cadences air-blowers dropped like rain, a thousand, a million, more . . . and their hatches crashed while cymbals clashed and feet, running feet, diving bounding running feet, weapons flashed, lasers slashed, wiping Grai-Grai from the air . . . burned the limestone ledges bare . . . all the nests, all the eggs . . . bare.

But hope! A voice, clear and silver, soaring high saying "No!" saying "Stop!" saying "Go!"

Her? gasped the Hunter, stunned.

The lady.

He turned from the hatch, spun back, and turned again, confused by the rage that filled him. The woman, flattened against the wall, said nothing; in her eyes, though, flickered the fear that the ally within her ship could be deadlier than the enemy outside. He stared at her. *So your plan, Poet, is that you pick them, and I kill them?*

Yes.

Then point them out, glosswing, and stand back—or get splashed with their blood.

The instant he flew out the hatch, he knew he was in trouble. As he'd predicted, losing a hand had upset his balance; he wobbled like a nestling, and snapped four feathers off his right wing. With a squint for the brightness of day, he concentrated on compensating for the minute change in his center of gravity. It was almost more than he could manage. Cursing, he dropped behind a sun-bleached outcropping, and kept it between himself and the aliens while he walked to the plateau's edge. There he stopped. He breathed deeply. Clumps of fear crystallized in his stomach, slicing his gut with their razor edges. *I can't do it!* he shouted. *I can't think about fighting if I have to think about flying.*

Then don't, said the Poet calmly. *I'll fly.*

You?

Where do you think my music is born, in a burrow?

I don't really have a choice, do I?

No.

All right, but get us where I want us to be—and for God's sakes, when I need the arms and talons, let 'em go!

They stepped over the precipice; the air shocked their wings wide.

Swoop around to the other side, urged the Hunter. The wind sleeked their feathers, and carried away the sound of their flight. The Hunter swung his head from left to right, watching their shadow far below, picking out individual grains of sand in the stone. His talons flexed again and again while he listened for noise from above.

What do you feel, Hunter?

Hatred. He chiseled his words out of ice. Hunger. Fury. I want to tear, to fight, to bite, to kill! Hot blood in my gullet and mewling whimpers and muscles that spasm until they go limp with death . . .

They judged their position and rode a draft up the cliff, above the plateau's tabletop, higher, rising, till their back brushed the clouds and the shadow of their span blanketed the scene. Far below, five puny wingless creatures crawled towards the lady's air-blower. They clutched weapons much like the one in his hand. He examined it one last time. *Ready, glosswing?*

The Poet spoke:

*"This, then, is that truth moment,
The pitting of my will against the foe
The strength of my blood against the invaders.
Fly, then, warrior, into the fray;
Speed into the test
For victory, glory,
Or both."*

Dwai aimed as he stooped, stifling a war cry by clamping shut his beak. The backs of five furry heads bobbed above the grasstops like seeds on a river; the Poet steered them for the one in the lead. *You think like a Hunter.*

I feel like one.

Hah! Ten meters above the ground, he squeezed the trigger once, then again. Flames engulfed two of the creatures, who leaped, and shrieked, and beat at themselves with burning palms. The others whirled and leveled their weapons—a fraction of a second too late, for Dwai whistled past them untouched.

They shouted guttural curses while he looped-the-loop backwards and upside down, speeding towards them from straight overhead. One looked up—shocked horror stretched his features—but before he could raise his weapon, Dwai's talons ripped away the lower half of his face. The man fell in the grass and dyed it crimson with his life.

Heat scorched the fronds under Dwai; he fluttered his wings to

come about. Burnt air filled his lungs as he drew a bead on the nearer of the two surviving aliens. He pulled the trigger gently. A gout of fire crisped the foe before he could scream.

One left, but he had already rolled to his right, away from Dwai's aim, and brought his own weapon to bear. Grass seeds popped and crackled as a fiery tongue flickered serpent-like toward the avian. He hopped up, and snapped his pinions hard to boost him above the stream of orange death, but a vagrant flare curled around the stump of his left wrist. He gasped. The sudden pain spasmed his muscles; he dropped his gun.

The human smiled as the hovering Grai-Grai withdrew his machete. Slowly, he raised the fire weapon and braced it with his left hand.

We will die! he shrieked inside, yet answered himself with a wry, *What doesn't? But we die proud.*

He charged straight towards that soot-blackened barrel, swinging the machete in an overhand stroke while he watched the alien tendons tighten and the alien knuckles whiten and—

The human burst into flames.

What?

Settling to the ground, he looked about in confusion, then understood all when the lady, a weapon of her own in her hand, staggered down the hatch ramp and sat with the heaviness of the ill. He jumped up, caught the air, and flew to her side. "Lady, you have a Hunter's eye and a Poet's timing. I thank you."

She nodded, and searched in his eyes for— "Which are you now?"

Dwai opened his beak, then snapped it shut. *Who are we? Poet, Hunter?*

We are both. We are neither. We are one.

"Lady . . . I am Dwai." He shook his head. "We are not healed, for one cannot call the other. We are both at the same time. I am . . . Hunter, Poet, and more."

The woman flew the invaders' ship home, with a promise that the Grai-Grai would be safe from her people, and with an apology for the Poet. She could not meet his eyes, but bustled about until she'd made all ready for take-off. Then she left.

Afterwards, Dwai circled high above the plateau and watched the ground creatures chew on the strewn corpses. Wondering if they'd find value in that cindered, foreign flesh, he told the clouds, "I found value in the woman—in her talk and in her fight. Value too I found in the battle poem as I streaked towards the invaders. Strange. The

battle was as worthy as the poem, the victory and its glory no worthier than the rhyme." He dipped his wings and banked. "The elders will be pleased that the aliens have left, and that I am healed, if not in the manner they expected. I am one; I have benefited twice over. This I will bring back to the flock. And they will become the stronger for it."

The sun glistened on his feathers as he pushed himself homeward.



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TUBE THROUGH THE EARTH

by Martin Gardner

*Here's the latest from Mr. Gardner:
a seven-question puzzle.*

A tube that goes straight through the earth's center has been the basis of many SF stories and novels. Plutarch seems to have been the first to ask what would happen to a body that fell through such a tube, and Galileo apparently was the first to answer correctly. In eighteenth century France, Voltaire and astronomer Pierre Maupertuis argued over the question.

The earliest instance I know of the tube's use in a SF novel is *Through the Earth* by Clement Fézandié, a New York City public school teacher. His short stories about "Dr. Hackensaw's Secrets" appeared regularly in Hugo Gernsback's *Science and Invention* before Gernsback started *Amazing Stories* in 1926, and I have often wondered why these amusing tales have never been gathered in a book. *Through the Earth* was first serialized in *St. Nicholas* magazine, Volume 25, in four installments from January through April, 1898.

In Fézandié's novel the tube is drilled simultaneously from the U.S. and Australia, using electricity supplied by tidal energy. A cooling system in the tube counteracts the earth's intense interior heat, and the tube is lined with a new heat resistant metal called carbonite. A vacuum is maintained inside the tube to eliminate air resistance. Electronic repulsion prevents friction between the sealed car and the tube's sides. William Swindon, 16 years old, volunteers as the first passenger, but you'll have to look up the serialization or locate a copy of the rare book to learn what happens on the trip.

In 1929 Appleton published *Earth-Tube* by Gawain Edwards, a pseudonym of rocket expert G. Edward Pendray, about a war between the U.S. and Asia. The Asiatics, after boring a hole through the earth and lining it with a metal called undulal, pour men and undulal tanks into the tube to conquer the Americas after they emerge near Buenos Aires. The plot is foiled by the U.S. discovery of a way to destroy undulal.

Shorter tubes that go straight from one city to another have also been used in SF for transportation. Neglecting friction and air resistance, no fuel is needed for a train because gravity draws it to the middle of the tunnel, then momentum carries it the rest of the

distance. This was the basis of Alexander A. Rodnykh's novel, *Subterranean Self-propelled Railroad between St. Petersburg and Moscow*, published around 1900, and a 1915 novel by Bernhard Kellermann concerning a similar tube from New Jersey to France. The idea of using gravity to help start and brake a car is actually employed now in many subway systems by putting vertical curves at the beginning and end of stops, and we are all familiar with the principle's use in bowling alleys for returning balls to the bowler.

The German Professor in Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893) explains to Lady Muriel how the straight tunnel permits a gravity train. L. Frank Baum uses a gravity tube for transportation in *Tik-Tok of Oz*:

If we assume a homogenous earth, ignore air resistance, friction, Coriolis forces, and so on, it is not hard to calculate that a car falling straight through the earth's center would make the trip in a trifle more than 42 minutes. Surprisingly, this time is independent of the tube's length. No matter how short, in a tunnel that goes straight from one spot on the earth's surface to another, the time for a trip is about 42 minutes, or 84 minutes for a round trip.

It is no coincidence that the falling body's maximum speed is precisely the speed (it was calculated by Newton) at which a satellite must be fired horizontally to put it in a circular orbit just above the earth. Under ideal conditions (no atmosphere, spherical earth, and so on) the satellite would complete one orbit in about 84 minutes.

Imagine the earth's axis perpendicular to the plane of the ecliptic, and the satellite circling the earth from pole to pole on a plane that intersects the sun. Further imagine that the sun casts a shadow of the satellite on the earth's axis. The shadow would oscillate back and forth from pole to pole in exact conformity with the oscillation of a gravity train—an internal satellite!—inside a tube from pole to pole. This is a way of saying that the train would oscillate with simple harmonic motion. Indeed, a gravity train on a straight track of any length through the earth would oscillate with harmonic motion.

It also is no coincidence that 84 minutes is the period of the so-called Schuler pendulum, an imaginary giant pendulum as long as the earth's radius and swinging just above the earth's surface.

Let's assume that a few centuries from now all technical difficulties are overcome and an airless, frictionless, adequately cooled tube is built to connect the metropolises of North Polaris and South Polaris. By extending the tube along, the earth's axis, Coriolis forces are eliminated. Through the tunnel, cylindrical cars carry supplies

and people in 42 minutes from one pole to the other.

How many of the following questions can you answer before turning to page 63?

1. As the car travels from North Polaris to the earth's center, does its velocity increase, decrease, or stay the same?
2. Does the car's acceleration increase, decrease, or remain the same?
3. If you are riding in a car and it stops halfway down to the earth's center, would you weigh less or more on a spring scale than on the earth's surface?
4. At what point during the trip would you experience zero gravity?
5. At what spot does the car reach maximum speed, and how fast is it going?
6. If a car fell down a similar tube through the center of the Moon, would the time for a one-way trip be shorter or longer than 42 minutes?
7. A famous SF story was written about an attempt to dig a deep hole below the earth's crust. It turns out that the earth is a living organism, and when its epidermis is punctured the earth lets out a mighty yell of pain. What is the story's title and who wrote it?



HAIKU FOR THE APOLLO ASTEROID MINERS

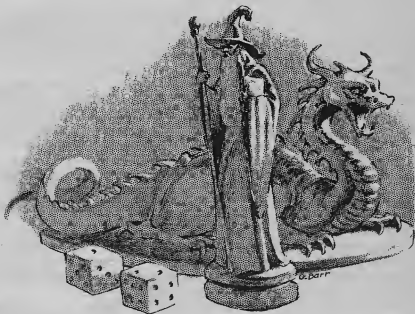
Stress workers alone,
bright cowboys with cyborged hearts,
tame mustangs of stone.

—Robert Frazier

ON PLAYING RÔLES: A THIRD LOOK

by John M. Ford

art: George Barr



Mr. Ford's first novel, Web of Angels, has just been published by Pocket Books.

For those of you who missed the previous article and the rôle-play phenomenon in general, here are some aids to navigation:

In the rôle-play game (RPG) the players take the parts of characters in an imaginary world. These characters are defined by numbers that measure such things as strength, dexterity, and intelligence. In all but a very few games, the world is laid out and operated by an additional participant called the Gamesmaster or Referee (and sometimes other things, especially after the players fall victim to a fiendish trap of the GM's devising). These "worlds" may use the props of heroic fantasy or science fiction, or less often such places as the Wild West or the Spanish Main.

Through movement on maps, conversations between players and GM, and the rolling of dice to determine the outcome of battles and other risky events, the "player-characters" live and grow and (sometimes) die; the players enjoy the pleasures of the adventurous life without personally suffering its hazards and discomforts.

Portions of the rules cover such things as the creation of characters, their social background, combat, magic, economics, and so forth. Some of these rules may be optional. Almost always the GM will create house rules to fill gaps and personalize the world.

"Rôle-playing" should not be taken in too literal a sense. Some players enjoy becoming deeply immersed in a character, even one radically different from their own personalities. Others prefer to remain themselves in an altered environment. Similarly, GMs may create worlds ranging from simple arenas for fighting monsters (the "dungeon crawl") to completely realized alien societies.

This is a very powerful form, which explains the tremendous success of RP gaming despite some very badly written and badly organized rulesets. Most games—chess, *Monopoly*, poker—can be played for "fun or blood"; RPGs can be played for fun, blood, glory, survival, the thrones of kings and the wealth of empires—and all for the price of some books and paper and dice.

CHIVALRY AND SORCERY

Fantasy Games Unlimited, Box 182, Roslyn NY 11576

128-page rulebook—\$10

Designed by Edward Simbalist and Wilf Backhaus

Here we have an attempt to do everything at once: along with the usual character, individual combat, and magic rules, *C&S* contains

social rules (including Influence and Courtly Love), army rules suitable for miniature figures, economics rules, and a lot of commentary. The page count is misleading—*C&S* is an 8½ by 11 book printed in eyestrainingly small type, containing easily 100,000 words. It is *not* for the casual role-player.

Character creation involves casting a horoscope, a longer-than-usual list of character requisites, and a number of calculated factors: Personal Combat Factor, Basic Influence Factor, Body and Fatigue Points (which give rise to the unfortunate heading "Fat." in character tables), and more. The system is slow, especially for the GM, and tends to produce large numbers of superpowered or hopelessly inept characters.

C&S combat uses percentile dice. Each weapon has its own combat table (some have more than one; a broadsword behaves differently in the hands of a knight than a yeoman) giving chance-to-hit against each of ten types of armor. The die roll is modified by personal ability, the target's defensive ability, the type of blow chosen, and the movements the combatants have made.

The system is very complex. In addition to weapon and armor choice, the player must select movement and attack type; not all these choices are apparent or strictly logical. A system of "blows" allows lightly equipped characters to strike more often than encumbered ones—if, that is, the players can fathom its use.

A recurring problem with *C&S* is that the rules are exhaustive but not lucid or organized. This means that one must read and well digest the entire book before play can begin, since all the factors affecting a particular subject may be spread out over five or six sections of the rules. Looking up a specific reference is just about impossible. Not one ruleset on the market today has an index worthy of the name; in a book of this size this is disastrous, not to mention very hard on the binding.

Probably the most unusual element in *C&S* is its treatment of magic and magicians. Rather than inventing their own system of magic (like *Runequest*) or filching one from fiction (like *AD&D*) the authors have gone to such "real" sources as Aleister Crowley, A.E. Waite, and P.E.I. Bonewits and attempted to reproduce and quantify the systems and laws of magic (or Magick, if you will) that according to these authors actually apply to the real world.

(As an aside: Bonewits, who has a B.A. degree in Magick, has written a manual of such systems and laws specifically for game designers. *Authentic Thaumaturgy* is published by The Chaosium, publishers of *Runequest*.)

This system is complex and highly detailed. It is also quite fascinating, if one is not put off by the conceit that all this is the real thing. There are more than a dozen specialized types of magicians, from tribal Shamans to Weaponsmith-Artificers to Cabbalists. All types share in various ways in a master list of spells divided by type (Divinations, Communications and Transportations, etc.). Casting spells costs the magician in physical fatigue.

Instead of receiving spells as automatic rewards for advancement, the C&S wizard must spend large chunks of his time practicing. Most of this "practice" takes the form of die rolls, and some have complained that the magician becomes a boring, unadventurous character who spends the game session in a corner with a box of dice. The authors reply that the "real" medieval magician was a philosopher who sought to master the Grand Art, not a fireball-pitching superhero.

(Well, he was and he wasn't. I highly recommend L. Sprague and Catherine C. de Camp's *Spirits, Stars, and Spells*, a book that explains the anthropological mechanisms behind magic without swallowing the concept whole.)

In actual play, the C&S magician is indeed playable. Large parts of the *character's* life must indeed be spent out of action—but not necessarily the *player's* time. Soldiers are also inactive during the winter; priests must spend time with their congregations. There is a great deal to be said for the idea that game characters must back up their daring adventures with mundane pursuits. Leiber's Fafhrd and Gray Mouser sleep and eat and drink too much, and frequently have to hire out to keep eating and drinking; and they are all the more believable for it.

C&S clerics actually are given priestly functions to perform, and restrictions of faith and piety on their actions, though they still tend to be a specialized, weapon-toting sort of magician. The religious framework provided is that of a central monolithic Church, opposed by the Powers of Darkness in the form of various Black Witches and Demonologists. Though some elements are missing—there are no White Witches, no heresies—this is well constructed, if it is what you want.

There is, however, no easy way to modify this structure, something that is true of the game as a whole. Despite claims that the rules are modular and adaptable, they are quite firmly welded to their Medieval European background—though this is changing as FGU publishes supplements. Modifications are still a major task.

And there are many unsettling features to the existing back-

ground. The authors have, they say, attempted to simulate the world of the High Middle Ages as its inhabitants believed it to exist: magic is real, alchemy can turn lead to gold, dragons roam the countryside battling parfit gentil knights. A quote from the rules: "The Feudal Age was chosen as the setting of the action. There is a powerful and most appealing tradition of glorious deeds and stirring events surrounding the whole period of Chivalry."

Except that that tradition is the creation of Renaissance nostalgics, nurtured and preserved by such later writers as Tennyson, Scott, and White. There would certainly be no objection to using this synthetic tradition, provided it were labeled as such. But the authors are terribly vague in this area.

Here is another quote, from the *C&S Sourcebook*, p. 26: "No matter how fantastic the setting, the basic laws of the universe should apply." What basic laws? Magic works in the game. Alchemy works. Magic swords can cut through tempered steel plate like cheese. Biology as understood by the medieval person was a far different thing from the present-day science. Yet a few pages after that first quote is a sharply worded criticism of RPG monsters that "ignore biological truth."

The authors continuously use words such as "authentic," "realistic," and "facts," but also claim to be using the worlds of fantasy, not history.

Certainly there is such a thing as "authentic fantasy." It implies being true to one's source materials and to the subconscious elements from which fantasy grows. But the authors never make clear when they have drawn from history, when from historical fantasy, when from other sources (the *C&S Vampire* is right out of a Hammer film) and when invented entirely—and the whole is prominently labeled and stoutly defended as "authentic."

And none of this is necessary—one must willingly suspend disbelief to play the game at all—and it is a considerable shame, because *C&S* makes a real effort at completeness, logic, and consistency, and is mostly successful. In many ways it is a triumph. Just as a GM's aid it is valuable, provided its limitations are understood. As a game, it requires a deeper commitment to world and character than the usual RPG; its players tend to be its strong partisans, and that is certainly an indication of success.

§ § §

TRAVELLER

Game Designers' Workshop, 203 North St., Normal IL 61761

3-book boxed set—\$11.98

Book 4, *Mercenary*, and Book 5, *High Guard*, \$5.98 each.

Designed by Marc Miller

No, it isn't all swords and sorcery out there. *Traveller* is science fiction in the grand manner: starfleets, space marines, pirates of the void, vast interstellar empires (evil and otherwise).

Traveller players begin by rolling dice for the usual abilities—Strength, Dexterity, et cetera. But the rest of the character-creation system is absolutely unique. Instead of beginning play young and inexperienced and progressing gradually upward, *Traveller* characters enter a service and, through a dice-and-choices system that is essentially a small game in itself, earn skills, ranks, and decorations. (The basic rulebooks concentrate on military services; the *Citizens of the Imperium* supplement adds civilian activities such as asteroid mining and the Imperial bureaucracy, and is recommended.) The system as given in the basic three books is simple and rapid—almost always taking under ten minutes per character. Books 4 and 5 expand the procedure, taking more time but producing more interesting and varied careers and usually better-rounded characters.

After being mustered out/retired and entering play, a character does not change except due to aging and wounds. This lack of an advancement system works, at least partly because of the high lethality of the weapons available. Unlike a sword cut, a burst of gunfire or plasma bolt tends to settle the issue all at once, all the more so if characters are in space or toxic atmospheres.

Thus, characters (those who get into fights, anyway) are lost fairly frequently. But since they do not slowly and laboriously pile up experience, and since the creation system is quick and interesting, the loss is not so deeply felt as in other games.

Another, perhaps more interesting, effect of this deadliness is that players have a real incentive *not to get into fights*. Negotiation pays off; a quick wit is better than a quick trigger finger. *Traveller* characters do not endlessly prowl starship corridors looking for something to kill.

They may, in fact, not prowl starship corridors at all. The economics of starship construction, purchase, and operation are meticulously dealt with (Book 2 is titled *Starships*). "High passage," a

first-class ticket between worlds, costs ten thousand credits, in a society where CR 5,000 is a tolerable annual wage. Even "low passage," travel in frozen sleep with a considerable chance of never waking up, costs CR 1000. (These terms, by the way, are lifted from E. C. Tubb's *Dumarest of Terra* novels, which the author annoyingly does not mention.) A small scout vessel, large enough for eight persons, double occupancy, costs in the neighborhood of thirty million credits. Ships are normally financed on forty-year leases.

Wow. Of course, players may hire on to ships that some non-player character is struggling to pay off. Or contract with a government or supercorporation for some military or shadier service, with a ship as payment. Or sign a lease and skip (a rule notes that one ship in thirty-six is in skipped status). Or hijack one (about one trip in two hundred will see a hijack attempt).

A straight-faced statement at the end of Book 3 reads: "The typical methods used in life by 20th Century Terrans (thrift, dedication, hard work) do not work in *Traveller*. . . ."

To return to the subject of weapons, *Traveller* combat is resolved by a roll of two dice, modified by personal skill, abilities (each weapon requires a certain level of strength and/or dexterity), range to target, and the type of armor or other protection the target wears. If a hit is scored, a number of dice are rolled and applied against the strength, endurance, and dexterity of the victim. Weapons effects range from one die for bare knuckles to *sixteen* for the "Fusion Gun, Man Portable, Mark 16." Characters will often lose consciousness and be taken out of action before they are mortally wounded; this blunts the aforementioned lethality a little.

This system is about average in complexity. Choices are limited to weapon type, but this choice is real, not artificial, determined by user skills and abilities, intended target, purchase price, and technological availability (more on this in a moment). Also important is "combat environment"—fighting in zero gravity calls for weapons that do not inadvertently act as propulsion units, and the heavier "small" arms tend to make embarrassing holes in starship hulls. (From the rules: "The cutlass is the standard shipboard blade weapon . . .") In short, players must choose weapons by other criteria than simple firepower.

This *functionality*—for want of a better word—is characteristic of *Traveller*. There is an enormous amount of functional data in the rulebooks. Nothing is presented for its own sake, or to show off the authors' erudition. Instead of lists of allegedly unique polearms or transcriptions from Latin bestiaries, there are simple, clear tables

that are aids to design rather than prescriptions.

Animals, for instance, are defined by their feeding patterns, plus size, toughness, etc.—a brilliant idea that allows the behavior pattern of an encountered beast to be determined while leaving room for real alienness in its physical characteristics.

Planets are created by a series of die rolls, taken in order with early rolls modifying later ones; thus the size of a planet influences its atmosphere and ocean percentage, and population density influences type of government and severity of laws. All these may alter the world's technological level.

Tech level matters a great deal in *Traveller*, though the author does not make an issue of it. Technology, and all manufactured items, are rated on a scale from 0 (fire and the wheel, barely) to 15 (the glorious Imperium) with hints of what Level 16 and up will bring. Earth A.D. 1980 fits in at about 7.5. A couple of points' difference can determine whether your wrecked starship can be repaired locally, how fast one can travel cross-country, how effective one's weapons are against the natives—which by itself is the plot of several SF novels, notably Gordon R. Dickson's *Space Winners*. (Though I might point out that a technological superiority does not always equal a military superiority, *vide* Vietnam.) And once an item becomes available, its price will decline as the tech level continues to rise, setting up opportunities for trade and restraint thereof.

Traveller may have the best-integrated economic system of any RPG. *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* (see "On Playing Rôles: A Second Look" *IA'sfm* September 1980) is widely inflated, with gold and jewels in heaps high as a manticore's eye; *C&S* bogs down in the minutiae of medieval agriculture and pay scales—and is correspondingly deflated; *Runequest* uses money as a counter of success and largely ignores its motion through society, despite the presence of a trading cult.

This is *Traveller's* great strength and beauty: everything is there, everything works—and the background is a framework, not a cage. Unlike *Dungeons and Dragons*, in which everything has a label but no structure, in *Traveller* everything has a structure, but the labels are left up to the players. If they find fusion guns too devastating (or cutlasses too silly) upper or lower bounds may be set on the available technology. If the rich markets and vast armadas of the Imperium seem to clutter things with hardware, move the game a few dozen parsecs out into the black frontier. If the players would rather explore one world in detail than flit among a hundred, build

one without a starport, far off the space lanes; if that planet plays out a ship can always hard-land there. And if one cannot do without a little magic in one's vicarious life, an optional rule section adds psionic powers—in fact, this set is better defined and balanced, and flows more smoothly into the rest of the game than the magic "systems" of many of the strictly fantasy RPGs.

There is no other rôle-playing game on the market that allows so much freedom to alter the *style* of the game without *altering the rules*. All this and clean, readable graphics (from GDW's superb art director, Paul R. Banner)—it is difficult to ask for more.

EXTRODUCTION: ON SUPPLEMENTS

As before, here is a very brief list of some of the player and GM aids available. Publishing costs being what they are, no prices are given here; send a stamped, addressed envelope to the game publishers (not *Asimov's*, please) for more information.

For *Chivalry and Sorcery*, the *C&S Sourcebook* is indispensable; it contains background information on the magic and economic systems, rules for medicine and the hunt, and the errata to the original rules. Also available are *Swords and Sorcerers* and *Saurians*, books dealing with barbarian cultures and intelligent reptiles (!) respectively. Forthcoming are supplements on the Arthurian Age, the Crusades, and feudal Japan (this last promises to be especially interesting). Play-aids include *Arden*, a complete medieval kingdom, and *Destrier*, a set of rules and special playing cards that attempt to make *C&S* combat more manageable.

Traveller currently has four supplements (Books 4 and 5 are major expansions of the rules, and recommended purchases as such). *1001 Characters* is just that; prerolled people—hard to justify with these rules unless the GM's time is severely limited. *Animal Encounters* is similar in format. *The Spinward Marches* contains star charts and world profiles. *Citizens of the Imperium* contains more instant characters, but is recommended for its new character-creation tables. An announced fifth supplement, *76 Patrons*, promises to be more interesting; it will have complete mission-for-hire scenarios. An Adventure, *The Kinunir*, concerns a large starship with a too-clever computer; it is, however, short on ideas for using the ship. An even bigger adventure on an even bigger ship, *Azhanti High*

Lightning, will be released as a board game in Summer of 1980. *Snapshot* and *Mayday* are board games that may be used as *Traveller* play-aids; *Snapshot* concerns combat aboard starships, *Mayday* ship-to-ship actions. Both are recommended, particularly *Snapshot*. GDW publishes a quarterly magazine with the awesome title *The Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society*.

And to insert a much-overdue correction, the address of *Alarums and Excursions*, the extraordinary RP amateur press association, is: Lee Gold, 3965 Alla Road, Los Angeles CA 90066.



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HOL122

EIGHT BALL BLUES

by Jack C. Haldeman II

art: Jack Gaughan



Mr. Haldeman reports he's now living in Gainesville FL, a nice place to live, with a college, a football team, book stores, and nice libraries. They also have lots of alligators, which nip at the ankles of joggers on campus. Or so he says . . . Mr. Haldeman's novels, Vector Analysis and Perry's Planet came out recently from Berkley and from Bantam.

Tucker Moore stroked it clean. He usually did.

The cue ball rolled smartly across the green felt, hit a cushion, rebounded, hit another cushion, gently tapped the eight ball, came to rest against the rail. The eight ball hit the corner pocket with a firm plunk and dropped in. Nobody in the bar was a bit surprised, except maybe Dade City Slim, tonight's sucker. Tucker hadn't even waited to see the ball drop in. Soon as he'd stroked it, he'd turned his back to study the juke box.

Tucker was good. One of the best.

"You owe me another beer," said Tucker without looking up. "And while you're at it, I could use a bag of chips." He dropped a quarter in the juke box. "Onion flavor." Tucker liked bar food. Hadn't eaten much else in years.

Dade City Slim dug into his jeans and fished out a crumpled dollar, laid it on the bar. Pop had already cracked the beer and sat the chips down next to it.

"Not your night, kid," he drawled, making change.

"You're telling me. That guy's good."

"Best this side of Lakeland," said Pop. It was true.

Tucker was near unbeatable in eight ball. No one in the county would play him for money. Once in a while some fool would come up from Tampa and get cleaned out, but usually they just played for beers. That suited Tucker fine. He was not a man of high ambition. He leaned his pool cue against the juke box and took the beer Slim offered him.

"You're not bad, kid," he said, punching buttons on the box. "I'm just better."

Slim nodded. Even as far away as Dade City, Tucker had a reputation. Worth a few beers to play him, though. A fellow could learn a lot just watching him.

Mickey Newbury sang from the juke box: *She Even Woke Me Up to Say Goodbye*. It was a sad song and the record was scratched. Next to shooting pool and chasing girls, Tucker liked music best of all.

It was late on a Wednesday night, not much happening, not too crowded in the bar. A few of the regulars sat around telling their usual lies to each other. Two truckers from the rock mine were playing gin at a table in the corner. They were both cheating. A dog, one hundred percent hound, slept in the doorway. He belonged to Buck, who was leaning at the bar trying to put the make on Mary. Mary was having none of it. Both of them were in good humor. They'd been playing this game for years, the constant haze of cig-

arette smoke their familiar backdrop.

Tucker was digging into his bag of chips when the stranger came in. An outsider in the bar was rare, especially on a week night. Everyone turned to check him out. This seemed to make him nervous; and he almost stepped on General, Buck's dog. That would have been a most grievous mistake, since Buck was 6'2" and weighed 285. General could be a mean dog, too, when the notion hit him.

Since the stranger didn't look like a troublemaker, most of the bar went back to their drinking, smoking, and lying. Tucker eyed the man carefully, though. A new face often meant someone was looking to lose some money at pool. Tucker could tell a lot about a man by the way he walked, the way he held his body.

The man looked to be about forty, maybe fifty. A little gray at the temples. He was pale, so he must be from out of state, or maybe he held down a desk all day. Hands looked soft, no calluses. He was dressed all in black, a combination made popular by Johnny Cash and Clint Eastwood. It was some sort of a jump suit, all one piece. Tucker figured him for an easy mark, good for a few beers.

The man walked up to Pop, talked to him a second. Pop grinned, pointed to Tucker. Another sucker. The juke box changed songs. John Prine: *Your Flag Decal Won't Get You into Heaven Anymore*. Tucker wadded up his bag of chips, dropped it into an ashtray.

"Mr. Tucker Moore?" asked the stranger.

Tucker nodded.

"I've got to talk to you. There isn't much time." The guy seemed kind of agitated.

"There's plenty of time," said Tucker. "Place don't close for a couple of hours."

"That's not what I mean. I'm Professor McCann and we've got to talk."

"I'm Tucker Moore and I'm thirsty. Play me for a beer and then maybe we'll talk." Tucker was not one to be rushed.

"Play you?"

"Eight ball. Usual rules." The guy was either stupid or playing dumb.

"Then we'll talk?"

"After I drink that beer I'm going to win, I reckon we can talk," said Tucker. "Got a quarter?"

"A quarter?"

"For the table. You know, it takes money. Twenty-five cents."

"Oh, money. How much is a quarter in uni-creds?"

"Uni-whats?"

"Uh, I forgot. I'm always forgetting. I'm just not cut out for this," muttered the man, fishing a handful of money out of a pouch on his jump suit and holding it close to his chest. "This is 1980, isn't it?"

"Last time I looked, it was," said Tucker. What kind of a scam was this guy trying to pull?

The professor separated some money from the rest, dropped it on top of the juke box. "Is there a quarter here?" he asked.

Tucker groaned, took a quarter from the small pile of money. He walked to the table and pushed it through the slot. The balls slid noisily into the return.

"I don't suppose you know how to rack?" he said dryly.

"I'm afraid not."

Now Tucker was sure it was a scam. Nobody could be that dumb. Deftly, he racked the balls, flicked an imaginary speck of dust from the felt. Pop might run a pretty beat-up bar, but he took care of his table.

"I break," said Tucker, chalking the end of his cue, dusting his left hand with powder. He was all business. Whatever this guy was trying to pull, he wasn't going to pull it on Tucker Moore.

It was a good clean break, solid. The balls spread out on the table and the eleven ball slid into the side pocket.

"Nine ball in the corner," said Tucker, taking careful aim. It went in cleanly. He walked around the table, planning his next shot. The stranger was still standing next to the juke box. He hadn't even gotten a cue down yet. What was he expecting to pull?

"Thirteen in the side." Something about the man bothered him. Not much, just a little. Just enough that he hit the cue ball a little too hard and the thirteen clipped the edge of the pocket and spun back into the middle of the table. "Your shot," he said.

The man looked puzzled. "What do I do?" he asked.

"You take your turn," said Tucker, rapidly losing his patience. "Do I have to explain everything to you?"

A blank stare said yes. The guy was either a looney or really sharp.

"I've got highs, the striped balls," said Tucker slowly. "That leaves you the low numbered ones, the solid colored balls. You call the pocket and shoot them. First one to sink all his balls goes after the eight. Sink the eight and you win. But you got to get all your other balls first." Fat chance. He'd left the guy with the cue ball snuggled up next to the fifteen. He'd have to go the other way, against the rail. There wasn't a decent shot on the table.

"I think I understand."

"I hope so," said Tucker.

The man reached for Tucker's cue. Tucker pulled it away real fast. "No one touches this cue but me," he said. "Get your own." He gestured to the cues hanging on the wall. His was a special custom-made, three-piece cue. A fellow up in Jacksonville had made it for him. Had a case for it, too.

The joker took the most warped cue in the bar. Didn't even know enough to chalk it up. He walked around the table once, stood behind the cue ball. Looked like he was concentrating real hard.

"Mr. Moore, I propose to sink the one ball in that corner pocket." Tucker nodded. It was barely possible. On a good night he himself might be able to do it one time out of ten.

"And the two *there*, the three *there*, the four *there*, the five *there*, the six *there*, and the seven *there*." With each *there* he indicated a pocket.

Tucker coughed, lost his breath. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The guy was pathetic.

"I don't have to sink the eight on this shot, do I?" asked the stranger.

Tucker managed a feeble "No." The joker had to be as crazy as a bedbug. The juke box flipped again: *Dead Skunk in the Middle of the Road*.

Before Tucker had managed to compose himself, the stranger had stroked the cue ball. He had terrible form. He hit it hard, and way off-center. It spun crazily and hit the one: *plonk*. It grazed the two: *plonk*. It crashed into the three and four: *plonk, plonk*. The five, six, and seven fell in order: *plonk, plonk, plonk*. The cue ball came to rest in the middle of the table.

"Did I do that right?" he asked.

Tucker gaped. He'd been standing with his mouth open since the one ball fell in. What he had seen was just not possible. No way.

"You did that fine," he said.

"Now what?" asked the stranger.

"You sink the eight," said Tucker weakly. At least that shot was clearly impossible. It was totally surrounded by Tucker's remaining balls. "But you have to hit the eight first. You can't move any of the other balls until you hit the eight."

The man nodded, looked it over for a minute. Pointing, he indicated a pocket, took aim, and hit the cue ball. He hit it low, right at the bottom. It lifted into the air and jumped over Tucker's balls, striking the eight. The eight jumped into the pocket and the cue ball spun to a stop. He hadn't moved any of Tucker's balls at all.

"Now what?" asked the stranger.

"I buy the beers," said Tucker lamely.

Pop had the beers ready. He was shaking his head. "I ain't never seen anything like that," he said.

"Me neither," said Tucker. "Better throw in some of those Slim Jims and a couple of pickled eggs. I feel the need of nourishment."

"You'll need more than nourishment to beat that fellow," said Pop.

"Ain't that the truth." He laid his money down and headed back to the stranger.

"Can we talk now?" He was still holding the pool cue.

Tucker nodded, staring at the table. "Can you do that again?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"Sink all those balls with one shot."

"Sure." He bent over and casually hit the cue ball. All of Tucker's remaining balls went into the pockets. In order. The juke box clicked. Jimmy Buffett: *My Head Hurts, My Feet Stink, and I Don't Love Jesus*.

"Euclid was never wrong," muttered the stranger.

"How's that?"

"It's all a matter of geometry. Elementary."

"Maybe to you, not to me," said Tucker. "Let's talk." He indicated a table in the back.

They sat down. Tucker took a hit off his beer, offered the other can to the stranger. He looked at it funny, took a sip, then another. Then he tilted it back and emptied it in one long pull. He seemed to like it. Tucker waved at Pop, who brought two more beers. As the other guy drank, Tucker peeled back a Slim Jim and ate it.

"How'd you do that?" asked Tucker.

"You mean the game? That's simple. All a matter of vector analysis. My only difficulty was in estimating the coefficient of friction for the table's surface. That made the initial shot a trifle inaccurate."

"You sank them all." He popped an egg into his mouth.

"Yes, but it was sloppy."

"I noticed that," said Tucker, who had noticed no such thing. Pop brought two more beers, carried off the empties. That fellow was putting the brew away like there was no tomorrow.

"Where you from?" asked Tucker. "I've never seen you around here before."

"You're not going to believe this," said the man, lifting another can of beer.

"Try me." Tucker had another for himself.

"I'm—well—I'm from the future."

"Future? Never heard of that. That in the Panhandle? Up Georgia way?"

"No, nothing like that at all. Not a place, a time. I come from the future, your future. I'm from the year 2046."

Tucker wasn't ready to believe that. Of course he hadn't believed that kind of pool shooting was possible, either. He drained his can, signaled Pop to bring over two more. The juke box switched back to John Prine: *I Guess They Ought to Name a Drink after You*.

Pop set the beers down. Tucker had a long pull at one. It was time for some serious thinking. He ate the other egg, offered a Slim Jim to the so-called man from the future.

"Where'd you learn to shoot pool like that?" he asked.

"This was my first time." He munched on the Slim Jim, washed it down with beer. "But I'm a physicist. Handling vectors is second nature to me."

"Not bad at handling a pool cue, either," said Tucker.

The man looked at his watch. It was one of those fancy new ones with lots of flashing lights. He pressed a couple buttons on it.

"I'm late," he said. "Time is running out. We've got to talk."

"We are talking," said Tucker.

"Serious talk."

"Pool is serious talk," said Tucker.

"No, no. I mean about the future."

"You going to start that nonsense again?"

"It's not nonsense. It's the truth. I can prove it to you." He splashed a handful of coins on the table. The juke box changed records. Tony Joe White: *Even Trolls Love Rock and Roll*.

Tucker looked at the coins. Never thought he'd see Reggie Jackson on a fifty-cent piece. There were all kind of dates up to 2046. He remained sceptical until he noticed the 2046 dollar was smaller and thinner than the dime he had in his pocket. Shrinking all the time. It was made out of plastic and had a picture of Lawrence Welk on it. The guy was either telling the truth or he'd gone to an awful lot of trouble to pull something off.

Actually, the pool shooting impressed him the most.

"So just suppose you are from the future. Not that I believe it for a minute, but what if you are? Did you come here to give me a tip on next year's Derby? The pennant race?"

"Nothing like that. This is important."

"Baseball is important."

"You have to save the world."

"Wait just a minute. You've got the wrong man. I'm just a working stiff." In spite of himself, Tucker was starting to halfway believe the fellow. Beer always did make him gullible.

"No, I'm certain I have the right man. Tucker L. Moore. Born 1952 in Deland, Florida. Your friends sometimes call you Skeeter."

"So you know a little about me. That doesn't prove anything." The juke box flipped. Jimmy Buffett: *Cheeseburger in Paradise*, a real toe-tapper.

"There's more, a lot more. That music is loud. Good, but loud. Isn't there someplace quiet we can talk?"

"We could go out to my pick-up," said Tucker, rising. The stranger had sure gotten his curiosity going. He paid Pop for the beers and grabbed a bag of dry roasted nuts. They were both a little unsteady as they weaved out the door toward the truck.

Pop didn't have a real parking lot, just a dirt pull-off by the road. Tucker had parked his truck under the oak tree. There was a chicken asleep on the hood. Tucker brushed it away and jerked open the passenger door. The driver's door hadn't worked in two years, not since that time he'd run off the road down Naples way. They climbed in and settled onto the worn upholstery.

"You said there was more. Let's hear it." Tucker felt like he was ready for anything. Beer did that to him, too.

"I'll have to be quick, there's not much time. It all started right after you married Betty-Ann Sommers."

"Now wait a minute! I married—er, I'm going to marry—Betty-Ann?" Betty-Ann Sommers was cute as a bug's ear. Always figured he'd end up with one of the Johnson sisters. Tucker grinned. Being married to Betty-Ann was nice to think about. Real nice.

"Unless things turn out differently, you will marry Betty-Ann Sommers in June of 1981. That's what I want to talk to you about."

"Betty-Ann . . . Don't that beat everything."

"Actually, the problem isn't with Betty-Ann, but with your son. You see—"

"Whoa, there! I'm gonna have a son? You mean I'm a daddy?"

"You soon will be, if we don't change things around. That's what I'm here for."

"I can't believe I'm gonna be a daddy." It was almost too much for Tucker to bear. He felt happy and sad all at the same time. He felt like crying and laughing all at once. He felt like passing out cigars. He felt like a drink and reached behind the seat. He pulled out a mason jar. It was almost full. The liquid was clear and potent. He

took a slosh and passed the jar to his companion. A fellow didn't get to be a daddy every day, that was for sure.

The stranger took a hit. It burned like fire all the way down and must have anesthetized his throat, because the second swallow was smooth as silk. He coughed, choked a little.

"That's the problem," he gasped, turning a little red in the face. "You can't be a daddy. Not to this boy."

That hit Tucker hard. Here he was, getting ready to be a daddy and all married up with Betty-Ann while this fellow was telling him it all couldn't happen. But it did, or would, or already had. Something like that. It was pretty confusing. He took another hit and stared out the window. The crickets and tree frogs were going a mile a minute. A hound somewhere was baying at the moon. Music from Pop's place drifted through the open door. Mickey Newbury: *The Future's Not What It Used to Be*. Boy, that was one true fact.

"What are you tryin' to say?" he asked.

"All I'm saying is that this boy can't be born. If he's born, it'll mean the end of the world."

"You mean my boy turned out bad?" Tucker took an angry slug from the jar. Ain't that the truth. Do everything for the kid; change his diapers, give him everything he wants, and look what happens. Turns on them what loves him. Maybe it was Betty-Ann's fault. He was torn between anger and tears, passed the jar to the man from the future.

"He wasn't bad," croaked the man between sips. "Just made a mistake, that's all. He was a geneticist, working with recombinant DNA. Made a mistake. A big one."

"Use simple words," said Tucker, taking the jar back. "I'm a simple man."

"You know about oil spills?"

Tucker nodded.

"Well, your son was trying to develop an organism that fed on oil spills. Clean things up, so to speak."

"Sounds like a nice thing for a son of mine to do. That oil plumb spoils the fishing."

"The trouble is that the organism ate plankton instead of oil. Found it out too late."

"Everyone's got to eat," said Tucker, digging into his bag of dry-roasteds.

"That's not the point. Plankton, Mr. Moore, *plankton*! That's the basis for the whole food chain. His organism has destroyed all the plankton in the world. Everything else is dying off because of that.

By 2050 there won't be a human left alive on the planet. It's the end of the world."

Tucker squinted his eyes, looked at him across the seat. "You're serious about this, aren't you?" His words were slurred, but his mind was clear. Well, sort of clear, anyway.

"Deadly serious, Mr. Moore. We're talking about the end of humanity. You have the future of all mankind in the palm of your hand."

Tucker looked at his hand. Who would have thought of such a thing? "Why didn't you go talk to him instead of me?"

"It's technical. Can't jump less than fifty years. Can't kill anyone." He was having trouble forming his words. His tongue didn't seem to be working right. He took another sip of white lightning. "Lots of other stuff, too. You wouldn't believe half of it. Using a lot of energy, maybe more than Earth can afford." He slumped back against the seat, half drunk, half dejected. "Only got a few more minutes. Got to convince you."

"Convince me of what?"

"Don't marry Betty-Ann Sommers. Whatever you do, don't marry that woman."

"It's that important?" Betty-Ann was one fine-looking woman. He hated to see his recent thoughts of marriage dashed so quickly.

"It's more than important, it's vital. The world depends on it. You must not marry that woman."

Tucker mulled it over, taking another sip from the jar. He was filled with a sense of patriotism, as well as being filled with booze. This was the first time he'd been called on to do something for his country. Not marrying Betty-Ann was a big sacrifice, but there really wasn't any choice. His country needed him. The world needed him. He would save the world. Pride swelled up in him like indigestion, hardly dented by the music from the bar. Willie Nelson: *Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain*. Usually that song brought tears to his eyes, but he was so full of patriotism it sounded like the national anthem to him.

"I'll do it," he said.

"We of the future thank you," slurred the man with great difficulty. He patted Tucker on the shoulder with one hand, took hold of the jar with the other. "Good stuff," he muttered. "Smooth."

In mid-sip, the man's edges started to flicker and blur. "Time's up," he said. "I'm going. Try the Phillies in 1986. They're going to have a good year. Sweep the Series in four straight." His watch glowed a bright red and he disappeared with a loud pop. The jar fell

to the seat, sloshing liquor everywhere.

Tucker wiped his forehead, staggered out of the truck. If that pool playing hadn't convinced him, that exit sure did. That had been a man from the future, no doubt about it.

He walked back into the bar, caught Dade City Slim's eye.

"Rack 'em up, Slim. I feel like a game of pool." Boy, did he feel like a game of pool. Grabbed a quick beer and a bag of pretzels from Pop. The record changed. John Prine: *The Late John Garfield Blues*.

As Slim racked the balls, Tucker chalked his cue and thought of the man from the future and Betty-Ann and his never-to-be son. He'd stay away from Betty-Ann no matter what, no matter how good-looking she was.

Of course there was always Betty-Sue Sommers. She was Betty-Ann's twin sister. Maybe he'd give her a tumble, see what happened. They were identical twins, alike as two peas in a pod.

Sometimes Tucker got them confused.

ANSWERS TO TUBE THROUGH THE EARTH (from page 42)

1. The car's velocity steadily increases from zero at the start to maximum at the earth's center, and steadily decreases thereafter to zero at the other end.
2. The car's acceleration is maximum at the start (32 feet per second per second). It decreases as it approaches the earth's center where it becomes zero. After that it accelerates negatively until it reaches the other end.
3. Halfway down the tube, in a stationary car, you would weigh much less than on the earth's surface because of the gravitational pull of the earth above you.
4. You would be in free-fall throughout the entire trip, and therefore always in a state of zero gravity.
5. The car reaches a top speed at the earth's center of about 17,770 mph, or almost 5 miles per second.
6. On the Moon a car falling through the Moon's center would complete the trip in about 53 minutes; on Mars, in about 49 minutes.
7. "When the Earth Screamed," a story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle about his Professor George Edward Challenger of *The Lost World* fame.

THE DEICIDES

by Gerald Pearce

art: Jack Gaughan





Mr. Pearce was born in England in 1928, was raised in the Middle East, came to the United States in 1948, and graduated from the University of Oregon in 1952. He's been a cannery laborer, second cook at a fire camp of the Forest Service, radio copywriter and newscaster, staff writer for Disney's TV show, and freelance writer. He lives with his wife in a pleasantly disorganized house in the Hollywood hills. Their son is in college. The author's wife does motion picture and TV research. Their many cats spend the time being friendly and generating good vibes and trying to convince Mr. Pearce that it is time for elevenses, if not lunch.

He and Nazar were going to kill a prophet. Perhaps today.

Guilt weighting down his heart like the sadness of a thousand lifetimes, Khalid started down to the edge of the river they had followed into the gorge last evening. It was not much of a river; to a man from the lower Euphrates, like Khalid, it seemed hardly more than an irrigation ditch—he could have leaped across it and kept his sandals dry. And yet—a spare alien figure in the Bedouin robes of the far south—he felt dwarfed by the surrounding Kurdish hills.

He squatted and drank from a cupped hand. The water was hard and cold, with the taste of eternity. Just upstream it had carved a narrow canyon through solid rock; into this an enormous boulder had wedged itself, and from under it the stream slid green and silent, breaking into rippling sounds like the laughter of children where it ran shallow over pebbles before joining the steeper, bigger stream that came from somewhere in the mountains and continued down through the deepest section of the gorge. Along the banks, tall poplars stood graceful and still. Wild mulberry and scrub oak covered hillsides rising steeply to bare rock walls that jutted into a sky just turning from dawn gray to a blue of ineffable tranquility.

Brushing fugitive drops of water from his short dark beard, Khalid stood up and climbed toward the camp they had set up above the confluence of the two streams.

Nazar and Simon were up now, stuffing their belongings into the smaller camel's saddlebags. Simon they had found in a tiny village in the Caucasus and taken on as their servant—a mute, small and dark and energetic, of unguessable age. Nazar was around thirty, a little younger than Khalid, fairer, short-muscled, with a Mongol hint to his eyes and cheekbones. He wore the turban, jerkin, and baggy pants of the Kurdish hill people, his ancestors.

"Where've you been?"

"Couldn't sleep, so I scouted a bit." Khalid saw Nazar's look of amused malice but ignored it. "Just beyond the remains of the bridge a trail leads off into the hills, following the main river upstream. Donkey and goat tracks, human footprints. The road proper shows the remains of a bitumen finish if you look closely enough. It goes down the gorge well above the river and disappears round that bend. From there you can see the waterfall where the third river comes in from the left. So the description matches. The main stream here's got to be the Rowanduz, the third one's the Alana Su, the gorge is the one they used to call Gali Ali Beg."

"Then he's got to be around here somewhere," Nazar said. "Let's crank up the Gadget and see what it can tell us."

"It won't help, it's non-directional. It picks up mass telepathic projections, not individual patterns—"

"If it works. Let's try it out."

Nazar began unstrapping the improvised crates containing the Gadget and its hand-cranked generator. Khalid went to help. Sensing his reluctance, Nazar grinned unsympathetically.

"You're getting squeamish, my friend. Your intellectual convictions deserting you?"

"No."

"Thought of a better plan?"

". . . No."

"I can do it alone, you know."

"You won't have to," Khalid said.

They lifted the Gadget out of its crate, set it down carefully on the sheepskin that covered it when traveling. It wasn't much to look at: a clumsy oblong box of metal and plastic with a few dials and switches and no manufacturer's identification, probably a pirated model. Its sophisticated contents might well have been reduced by time and accident to a jumble of futility. Neither Khalid nor Nazar had more than an elementary knowledge of electronics; the Gadget—Huopponen's Gadget—was far beyond their grasp, and probably beyond the grasp of anyone in Nasiriyya.

Packed separately was the generator which some nameless savant had rigged when he could no longer get current from a plug in the wall. Khalid fitted the twin cranks to the generator, uncoiled the cord with its splitting insulation, plugged it into the Gadget. The combination looked like an ancient military field radio without a microphone. Earphones were packed with the Gadget. Nazar plugged them in.

Simon had finished loading the rest of the gear onto the camels and now watched with alert incomprehension as Nazar and Khalid began cranking the generator. It resisted at first, then moved more easily. Its output was shown on a dial they could not read because it was marked in an unfamiliar language, but the indicator moved rapidly. In the Gadget's face a light came on. Nazar snatched up the earphones, held one to his ear. Khalid pushed his headcloth aside to be able to hear the other.

The Gadget had picked up nothing when they'd tested it amid the ruins of the University of Tiflis, where they had found it; but the Georgian hills had been depopulated in the religious wars of the 21st century, and no visionary had arisen to focus the yearnings and angers of those few who were left. The convictions of the old days had disappeared, or been too fragmented by events and time and disillusionment to do more than contribute to the static.

Static was all they picked up now, meaningless, just audible. Khalid touched the volume control. It became louder but no more meaningful. There was a slide frequency-selector. He began to move it slowly.

And quite suddenly the sound from the earphones was neither random nor unfocused. It was faint but purposive, with a quality that suggested at once a raging human voice and the inexorable grating rumble that accompanies an earthquake.

Nazar's eyes were hard and bright.

"That's got to be it. That emotional content—!"

"Yes."

"Get any words?"

Khalid shook his head. "Perhaps the Gadget's defective. Or the prophet's already dead, or away, or is a sporadic, in a quiescent phase."

They had stopped cranking. The light in the Gadget had gone out. The earphones were silent. Khalid disconnected them.

"I never heard a god before," Nazar said. "That one's angry."

Khalid sighed. "If we've got to comb the hills, we may as well start with that donkey track. Give me a hand, will you?"

They repacked the equipment, with Simon's help loaded the crates onto the steadier camel.

They turned onto the track and followed it upstream, the three men on horses, Simon leading the two camels.

So the Gadget worked. At least partly. It had located coherent patterns of electromagnetic energy emanating from a community with resentment on its mind.

The Gadget had been devised by an electronics wizard named Huopponen to seek experimental verification of certain theories about the electromagnetic nature of telepathic phenomena. These asserted that communities of believers created gods in their own image, projecting them telepathically into objective if incorporeal existence, and Huopponen proved them right. Though he went on to elaborate that the apparently random individual of above-average telepathic sensitivity could tap the mass projection for insight into the communal mind, which explained the success of certain politicians and preachers, and that the especially gifted could draw on the projections for the power to effect physical manifestations—miracles—no one was listening. His Gadget had been intended as a tool for psychosocial studies but became a fad; Huopponen, who liked good wine and very young women, was not averse to making a fortune on patents and licenses and was slow to realize that the 21st century was proving as fertile a ground for superstition as the 12th had been. God-drunk prophets and opportunistic politicians made the escalation to disaster inevitable.

As inevitable, generations later, was the suspicion with which those trying to pick up the pieces looked on rumored prophets. A prophet could focus mass yearnings according to the requirements of his own disordered psyche. . . .

After a while the track left the stream to follow a rill a child could step across. The track joined others and the sun rose over the hills and the travelers began passing among apricot and plum trees with soft yellow-winged butterflies like fluttering petals dipping among the branches. An occasional bee added a lazy buzzing background to the clop of horses' hooves and the soft padding of the camels' feet on the dusty trail. They paused once to allow a shepherd and his flock to pass in the opposite direction. He greeted Nazar in Kurdish, recognized Khalid's attire and wished him peace in clumsily accented Arabic. Khalid answered politely but was instantly alerted to danger. He threw Nazar a sharp look.

Dust hung in the air from the sheep's passing. The younger man

wiped dust from his mouth with the back of his hand and spat irritably.

"News of the prophet had reached us down in Nasiriyya, hadn't it?"

"I'm worried about mobility, diffusion, the possibility of contagion."

"We all are. But we've always known there was a bilingual interface between the Arab and Kurdish regions, and now we know it's wider than we thought. Rumor of a prophet travels five hundred kilometers and an unlikely Kurd knows two words of Arabic: neither datum means a plague of prophecy let loose on the world."

He had spoken with surprising vehemence, even considering the irritations built up during two years of difficult and dangerous travel and search. More than that, he had cut himself short—Khalid was sure of it.

"Go on," he said. "Let's have the rest."

"There is no 'rest'. You intellectuals are so arrogant you think you can read minds."

"No, but we're human; sometimes we can hear the sound of things unsaid. Something's bothering you. You deride me for being squeamish about a cold-blooded murder, and offer with appropriate contempt to do it yourself. You assume the role of a simple straightforward man of action, unbothered by the subtleties of philosophers and moralists. It's too much; it's not like you. You're like a mule with a burr under its saddle."

"And you're the man with an exposed nerve in a broken tooth. You've got to keep worrying it."

Khalid sighed, made a gesture of defeat. A few minutes later they reached the outskirts of the village.

A giant mulberry tree rose at one side of the trail, which then widened into a broad uneven area scarred by the remains of camp fires, pocked by tent-pegs. It was the modern mountain equivalent of a caravanserai, spartan but tree-shaded, with the little stream running fresh and free along one side and then down the hill toward the river. Beyond the open area the trail narrowed once more, leading directly into the main street of the village itself, a bare hundred meters ahead.

Khalid rode into the clearing, reined in his horse. The air was still and fragrant. The stream made a crystal sound.

"Your ancestors," he told Nazar as he dismounted, "chose more wisely than mine. Or more luckily."

"Speaking of luckily," Nazar said, "look up the hill behind you."

Khalid did so. Among the trees was a hut made of boughs with the leaves still attached. From behind it a young woman had just emerged. She was scattering feed for a noisy family of chickens. He felt suddenly twice his age, bowed down with responsibility.

"Unload the Gadget first, Nazar."

"A bout of happy active lechery is just what you need," Nazar diagnosed. "Might make you possible to live with." With sudden aggressive hunger: "It's been too long."

Khalid agreed. He made the camel carrying the equipment kneel. "Of course, if this is the prophet's country, you might get stoned to death for deflowering a sacramental virgin." Nazar only grinned, shook his head slightly. They lowered the two containers from the camel's pack saddle and Khalid looked up the hill again.

The girl had come half way down from her hut to meet them. She had lived under a gentler sun than they and for half as many years. Her face was fresh and round and her eyes were as wide as a gazelle's but not timid. Her mouth was half smiling. She wore a shawl that covered her hair and shoulders and a dress that was full and shapeless over a full but not shapeless young body. She overcame any possible linguistic difficulty by reaching down to the hem of her dress and bunching it up above her waist.

"'Sacramental virgin,'" Nazar breathed derisively.

"She's pretty," Khalid said as they manhandled the generator to the spot Simon had chosen as the tent site. "She could give you a lot more than fleas."

"We'll be home soon. The Amir of Nasiriyya's hospital has a good supply of penicillin."

"You sure they'll spare you any?"

"The Amir's your uncle. And if I need it, I predict you will too. We'll claim it as our price as good assassins."

Nazar smiled up at the girl. She smiled back and dropped her hem and turned and started back toward the hut with the sturdy stride of the hill people.

Nazar followed.

Simon stopped what he was doing to watch him go, his thin face drawn and pale, in his eyes a mute rage of hunger.

"You'll get your turn," Khalid told him, with the gesture—hand palm up, thumb and fingers pressed together—that to an Arab counsels patience. That Simon could hear, he knew. How well, he still didn't; still less how much he understood of a language foreign to both of them, his own indifferent Kurdish. But Simon's narrow dark face split into a grin.

He went to tend the animals, leaving Khalid to wrestle with the tent.

Before Nazar came back, the Gadget and the generator crates were stored inconspicuously in a corner of the tent, half hidden under their cured sheepskins, a pair of saddlebags thrown on top of them. The ancient rug was down, the two bedrolls ready for unrolling. Simon had a small fire going just outside the tent and was heating water to which he would add the roasted and pulverized blend of scented roots and herbs they had bartered for from an old man near Lake Van. He had called it *qahva*, which Khalid had recognized as another form of the Arabic *qahwa*, coffee. He had never tasted coffee but knew from his reading that this was not it, only a post-destruction substitute; but it was mildly stimulating and made a pleasant drink.

When Nazar finally entered the tent, Khalid, his back turned, was checking the two revolvers carried in a saddlebag.

"All right," Nazar said. "Don't hide them, we'll be needing them."

A paralyzing chill spread from Khalid's belly.

"You mean he's here?"

"So she says," Nazar said cheerfully. "Go ask her yourself. And while you're there don't forget to do a few other friendly things too. They'll clear your mind for sterner duties."

"I envy you. You can turn off the questioning mind at the first biological distraction."

Simon brought in their breakfast: day-old circles of flat unleavened bread warmed at the fire, goat cheese, the imitation coffee. He stood back expectantly. Khalid threw him a small nod in the direction of the hill. Simon disappeared with alacrity.

The two men sat down cross-legged.

"She'd warm you up in no time," Nazar said. "That girl is a sexual miracle—and I promise you that's the voice of experience talking, not deprivation. All for a poor-grade silver trinket."

"I don't need warming up, just turning the mind off. Since that can't be done until it has some answers"—Khalid smiled faintly—"I'd like to do it the kindness of providing them at the earliest opportunity."

He tore off a chunk of bread and began chewing on it.

"She has breasts like half-melons," Nazar said meditatively. "She smells of youth. She has a body that clings like honey, only sweeter." He helped himself to food.

"What does she say about the prophet?"

"That he is very old, and originally not one of the hill people. He's been here two days but has just passed the time with the villagers and told stories to the younger children. No prophesying, no manifestations."

"Does she believe in him?"

"Completely. He's been here often. She's heard him call down thunder from a cloudless sky and speak with the god's voice."

"Saying?"

"Oh, commandments, injunctions, stories of the wars. Imprecations hurled at the Old Ones, the old ways." Nazar chewed and drank. "How do we proceed?"

"Meet him, size him up." Khalid sipped his imitation coffee. He liked it better every day, hoped it contained nothing habit-forming. "Come back and crank up the Gadget and listen to his god. Then decide."

"You're only delaying it, Khalid."

Khalid swallowed, brushed crumbs from his beard. Outside, he could see his mare and Nazar's gelding browsing at the edge of the clearing. That there was anything to browse on showed how seldom visitors camped here. The fires that marked the ground had been dead a long time. But the girl up the hill meant there must be some continuous commerce. Or did she draw her customers mostly from the village? Was hers an occupation chosen here by lot? Did it fall to every young woman by turn? . . . All most unlikely. He was simply complicating the picture because his mind was unquiet.

He said slowly, "In the past two years, I've learned to survive by adopting a measure of ruthlessness. I've killed wolves and bandits and don't grieve for them. Now we have two old guns and eight rounds between us. Count on fifty-percent misfires. But even one soft-nosed forty-five calibre bullet can tear a man apart. I'm shaken to the core at the thought of doing that to a harmless old Sensitive who once in a while goes vatic and tries to bend the world to fit his own private neuroses."

For a second a shadow—restless, dissatisfied, fleeting—dimmed Nazar's face. Khalid saw it but said nothing, popped a final bit of strong-smelling cheese into his mouth.

"Squeamish," Nazar said as though nothing had happened.

"Common human sympathy. Read it as a projection of self-pity if you must, but let's make sure we hit the right man." Khalid poured the last of the imitation coffee into their unglazed drinking cups. Nazar picked his up and sipped with noisy relish.

"An old Sensitive who goes vatic can be anything but harmless."

Khalid grunted. The idea that had occurred to him seconds before failed to surprise him. He examined it from every angle he could find before saying, without force, "Although I don't like it, I'm hunting down a prophet because disturbed prophets shape disturbed gods. You, my friend, are using a lot of tough forthright-man-of-action talk to cover the irrational fear that we may kill a prophet of another sort. You're a believer looking for something to believe in."

He took his time drinking before glancing over casually to Nazar's reaction. His face was clenched like a fist. The hooded Mongol eyes smouldered.

"You left your brain in Nasiriyya."

"You're in too much of a hurry; you just want to identify him and do the job and run—"

"Before he tunes in on us and throws a miracle we can't survive."

"I think to hide your reluctance. Not from me. From you. I don't think you put much credence in the Gadget, Nazar—it might be wrong, or too superficial, there could be *more* behind the Huopponen phenomena; even if he is crazy the prophet *might* be in touch with . . . something else."

Nazar said thickly, "No one, not Huopponen, not anyone else, has ever proved that every prophet who ever lived was deranged, or that every prophet who ever will live is going to be just another Huopponen footnote. You're as knowledgeable of scientific method as a bat; you can't tell a theory from a heap of camel dung."

"Let's forget theory and examine each case as it comes. This is the first case."

Nazar drained his cup, threw out the dregs, sawed on his lower lip with strong square teeth.

"Then let's get on with it."

"Soon enough," Khalid said. He finished his breakfast. "I hope we can trade for some fruit in the village."

Nazar relaxed, expelled a long breath. He got up and stepped through the tent's opening and stood staring at nothing.

"A fine pair of assassins," he said at last. "One afraid of finding a prophet who's real in the believer's sense . . . and the other afraid of hurting anyone. We should both have been illiterate rice farmers in the eastern marshes."

They were washing their few utensils at the stream when Simon came down the hill looking sated and content, like a man who has seen and done everything, who would be quite willing to die.

When Khalid and Nazar walked into the village they found it

quiet but not empty. There was a stall with apricots and plums and cucumbers in baskets, all shaded by a roof of slim branches with dry leaves filtering the sunlight. Another had lettuce, melons, and dried dates that had not grown in these mountains, and still another had live lambs and chickens. There they paused for Nazar to offer fulsome compliments. The gray old woman in charge thanked him gravely and said there would be much more merchandise tomorrow when the market of the quarter moon would bring traders from five villages, but no doubt the lords knew that and had come to take part. Indeed, Nazar said, they were traders and had goods to barter, but had come specifically because on their travels they had heard rumors of a prophet and, lately, that he was here. Was he, and could she tell where they might find him?

Following her directions, they found an old man sitting on a strip of matting at the far end of the market place where a crudely woven awning attached to the sandal-maker's open hut threw a patch of shade. He was telling stories to a semi-circle of small children, and had established with each a rapport as tangible as a rope. He smiled a lot, showing few teeth in a face as worn as the bark of an ancient tree. He had a sparse beard the color of dust tangled about his chin. He wore a grubby threadbare garment that had once reached his ankles and might have been striped. A patterned Arab headcloth folded into a narrow strip was wound thickly around his ancient head to anchor a skull cap. When he looked over the heads of his audience and saw Khalid and Nazar, the faded eyes in their deep shadowed sockets under dust-colored brows were a friendly twinkling blue.

Khalid's heart sank. The old man had the transparent good nature of a pet puppy. He had only time to make a wild guess based on study and appearance—*Tel Keyfi, probably Christian*—before the old man extended arms like brown twigs and called words of welcome in Arabic.

Khalid responded heartily, concealing a numb sorrow. The old man dismissed the children, assuring them he had enough tales to last till the moon was full and would continue later. Respectfully, Khalid introduced himself and his companion, attributing Nazar's attire to ancestral heritage and his fluent Arabic to his having been raised with him in Nasiriyya.

"A long way off." The old man was impressed. "I think . . . I think I was there long ago. A cluster of mud huts. But you, gentlemen, are clearly rich, so perhaps I misremember. Forgive me."

"It was a cluster of mud huts," Khalid said carefully. "It's not

much more now. But at the end of the wars a wise man came there and began, slowly, with much care, to gather those who remembered, and books, and learning. Now his grandson is Amir of Nasiriyya. He is rich enough to have sent my friend and me on a trip to discover how the world is faring and to look for useful trade."

The old man nodded. As a cover story it had the advantage of being true. It simply left out their central assignment and the reason for their side trip into Georgia in search of the Gadget which old records said had been in use at the University of Tiflis when the wars began. There had been other Gadgets, of course, but what had happened to them was anybody's guess.

"We traveled north," Khalid continued, "through the land of the Twin Rivers. Amara, Baghdad, Mosul, all are dust. So is Tel Keyf."

"Ah, Tel Keyf . . . I was born there. Or perhaps it was my father who was born there. When you grow as old as I, you cannot always tell what happened to you from what someone told you long ago." The old eyes had clouded over, looked inward, seemed to witness horrors. "And yet I remember holy Jerusalem in flames, ancient Damascus a smoking ruin filled with the stench of death and burned flesh. Did I see such things?" His memories, whether first or second hand, were intensely vivid to him. Almost reflectively he scratched high on his rib cage, just below the collar-bone. "If not . . . then how did I get this?" He pulled his garment open at the neck to show converging white stress lines of old scar tissue that continued down his arm. He shook his head.

Nazar said, "Sometimes when there is great pain, the mind refuses to remember for fear the memory may be too vivid."

"Yes, sometimes God is kind." The old man pulled the cloth back over the scars. "Did you travel to the cities of Medina and Mecca?"

"No," Khalid said. "We went to the country once called Turkey, traveled briefly in Georgia, then started home again. We do not think Mecca and Medina survived the wars." He said it with appropriate regret in case he had guessed wrong about the old man's religious background. "I would have thought, sir, that being from Tel Keyf you were probably a Christian."

"Perhaps I was. But what is Christian? A word like any other to name a mistaken faith." A frown. "The Amir of Nasiriyya—he has no machines, has he?"

Unexpectedly Nazar chuckled.

"No, old grandfather," he lied easily. In fact steam-driven generators provided power for the Nasiriyya hospital and, a few hours a day, for the experimental laboratories; they had for some time

powered a short-wave radio signal trying to locate other communities where remnants of scientific knowledge might have been saved. The town had not escaped unharmed in the wars, but it was now an oasis of enlightenment in the desert of the new Dark Age, a place where they still remembered that the world was round. . . . "No, the Amir has no desire to return to the past. The past was mad."

"Ignorant," the old man said sadly.

"Then it is true what they say about you?"

"That I am a prophet?" The old man shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Sometimes God speaks from the sky. Sometimes he speaks through me, though he knows what a frail and inadequate spokesman I am. Between times, I only wait for his next call upon me."

"We had hoped to hear your teachings," Khalid said.

The prophet sighed—an impatient sound, his breath rusty in his throat. He moved his arms and shoulders as though straining at unseen bonds.

"To obey God, to live with nature, and avoid machines. Thus the words of an old man summarizing the teachings of the prophet he sometimes becomes, when God enters his body." He made a gesture of negation, as though prophethood were a burden almost beyond bearing. He stared with pale abstracted eyes down the dusty little street toward the giant mulberry standing guard by the camp ground, then at Khalid and Nazar in turn. To Khalid, it seemed the look of a man who knows a brutal blow is going to fall on him and is trying to understand why.

Khalid reached into the pouch hanging from the belt around his waist.

"I may have what is bothering you." He took out a sophisticated gold watch on an expanding metal strap. "I traded a good knife for this because I recognized the case was gold. I never thought of it as a machine." He had in fact traded it from an Armenian shepherd who had discovered an untouched cache of jewelry and had no idea what a watch was for. Its performance was erratic at best. Khalid hoped the technicians of Nasiriyya would get some value from it. Now he gave it to the old man.

Slowly the old face cracked into a grin. For a moment he was remembering, this time with fondness. He raised it to his ear. It was unwound. He turned the stem with the practised air of a man who wound a watch every day, returned it to his ear, listened to the ticking with rapt attention as though to music coming from the heart of a flower. Then he stopped grinning, sighed, shook his head.

"It is a machine," he said regretfully, and swung it by its strap with astonishing force against the mud-cemented stones forming the low half-wall behind him. The crystal exploded into fragments. Then the old man found another stone and held the watch against the wall and pounded it to shapelessness.

He was breathing hard when he handed it back to Khalid.

"The gold is still gold," he said.

They maintained their casual visitors' pace and deportment as they walked back along the village street.

Nazar was tense as a coiled spring. "He's at least half mad." Keeping his expression mild and his voice down cost him an effort. "Partial amnesiac, a hopeless paranoid about anything mechanical, and he's half-way convinced he remembers the destruction of Damascus and Jerusalem. He'd have to be over a hundred years old."

"He might be." Khalid was just as tense. He knew that something unspeakable could happen before they got out of the village. But while Nazar's tension demanded action his own dreaded it. "He's lucid about the vagaries of memory, and he's suffered some severe physical trauma that could account for the amnesia. Those were burn scars, I'd swear it. He could've picked them up in a village fire when he was ten years old and barely escaped a burning hut, and then grafted the memory to tales he'd heard of the cities burning."

"Listen, Khalid. If he were just an old neurotic verbalizing his inner tensions, who would care? But he's a Sensitive—"

"I know."

"You know what a disturbed Sensitive can—"

"I know."

They passed the last of the huts. The street became the path through the encircling trees leading to the camp ground. They quickened their pace. Nazar said, "You think he was getting on to the Gadget?"

"Of course. We must've been broadcasting its presence like a symphony of guilty knowledge. If I hadn't had that watch and thrown him off the scent with it, he'd probably have gone oracular and got us stoned to death. 'Live with nature, avoid machines.' Not very impressive. I think he's amnesiac about what he preaches when the fit's upon him."

"Then in the name of sanity," Nazar demanded, "why take time to fool around with the Gadget? Let's do it, before anything has time to happen."

They reached the tent, strode in. Simon was stretched out almost

asleep, his lean face slack with satiety. He came awake and stumbled out of the way. Khalid got both hands on the saddle-bag holding their meager arsenal and stopped, holding it shut, white-knuckled.

"No. Not every crazy old Sensitive starts a religion. We've got to be sure."

"You're the one who's crazy. I told you—I'll do it myself. Give me one of the guns."

"You're full of vengeance because he's not a 'real' prophet. What did you expect?" Khalid set aside the saddlebags and threw off the sheepskins, started opening the crates. "Give me a hand with these, then get Simon to saddle the animals, horses first."

They dragged the equipment free of the containers and Nazar went to give orders to Simon while Khalid connected it up. Nazar came back and they began cranking the generator. The light came on; Nazar picked up the earphones and held them so both could hear the static coming from them. Khalid only had to touch the selector slide.

A clap of thunder. It trailed off, and blending with its rolling echo there was suddenly a voice, at once inseparable from it and distinct, interrupted at intervals by a crackling burst of static.

"... seek the Old Ones in the caves and desolations of their own making ... (static) ... By the sign of the machine ... (static) ... Let the good earth drink their ... (static) ... crows and kite hawks feast on their eyes, wolves and maggots on their flesh ... (static) ... without mercy, kill with knife and stone, scythe and bludgeon. ..."

—A shadow on the tent's fabric, a movement at the entrance. Khalid thought, *It's Simon*, but threw a quick glance. Not Simon. The girl from the hut up the hill stood motionless, intent.

Nazar put down the earphones. Both men turned.

"Machine people," she said.

From somewhere Nazar summoned a grin.

"No, flesh and blood, like you."

She said gravely, "Your pardon. I mean men of the past, users of machines." She ducked into the tent. Khalid saw Simon hovering worriedly outside, but the girl's presence pushed everything outside to somewhere as remote from concern as the far edge of the galaxy. Whore, he reminded himself; trade goods. He saw Nazar wave Simon back to his duties but it barely registered. All the urgency had gone from what they were about, transmuted into the single imperative of desire. That Simon and Nazar had used her so short a time before was immaterial. She wore the same shawl, the same shapeless dress from within which her body offered irresistible promise. He was

staring. Her response was to more than the stare; she made a small involuntary sensuous movement, held up a hand and threw him a pleading glance: *Not now*. She looked at Nazar. "I knew it when I lay with you. Not from anything you said or did. My skin knew it, my belly knew it and my blood, and finally they convinced my mind."

Khalid thought despairingly, *Another Sensitive!* That was why she had seemed to respond to him physically, why Nazar had found her so astonishingly pleasing. She caught and internalized and felt and gave expression to the very hunger she was allaying. That answered the question about her choice of profession: it was hers because—given a basically passionate nature—she couldn't help it, the inevitable consequence of telepathic feedback. What a powerful instrument she must be. . . .

"But you didn't come here to kill us," Nazar said. Briefly he met Khalid's eyes. Nazar knew.

"How? Three men? And even if the voice of God says kill, it is still a terrible thing to do . . . so terrible I—wondered . . . and was drawn here to find the answer."

Khalid started to crank the generator again. Nazar joined in. When the light on the Gadget came on Khalid beckoned her near. From the earphones the voice spoke out of echoing thunder, repeating in different words its catechism of hate. Khalid held them up for her, half stupefied by her presence. She leaned forward to hear more clearly, listened; straightened up. Despair had become a raging in his blood.

"The voice of God," she said sadly. Khalid felt her eyes on him tangible as the touch of a hand. He stopped cranking, put down the earphones.

"The voice of your people," he corrected. "As taught to think by an old man who makes you want to love him but who is mad and is known as a prophet. How could a machine, made by the hands of men, bring in the voice of God? No, no. This is the voice of your people, with all their voices made one in agreement and error."

The girl shook her head. "The voice of God," she repeated. "And now you're going to kill me."

She kept looking at Khalid.

Nazar said from behind her, "Doesn't your prophet promise you rewards after you die? Others have."

"That's silly. When you die, you die." She said, to Khalid, "I'm not afraid of you. For you, killing would be like dying."

She stepped close and embraced him, sliding her arms under the loose Bedouin cloak, her face turned against his chest. He felt the

fullness and warmth of her, felt her sigh once in resignation. *We needn't—we'll take her with us*—but Nazar had already slipped the knife hidden under his jerkin free of its scabbard. It was the one thing on his person not of Kurdish design. It was long and slender and double-edged and made for one purpose only. His face was mask-like and wooden but his movements were surgical in their precision as he drove the blade up through the girl's dress under her ribs and through her lungs into her heart. She stiffened hideously. Her face came up off Khalid's chest, in her eyes amazement and pain, her mouth open and small hopeless sounds coming from her throat. Nazar clamped a brutal hand over her mouth, twisting the knife with his other hand, withdrew it as she started to relax forward onto Khalid's chest again, to slump to the ground.

Khalid let her down as gently as he could, his mind a nest of horrors. He pulled a hand out from under her body and it was covered with blood. *Murderer*, his mind whispered in implacable accusation. *Murderer*. He wiped the blood off on the ground, wiped the resulting mixture of dirt and blood off on his cloak, listening to the unrelenting whisper.

Nazar cleaned the blade of his knife on the girl's dress.

"All right," he said thickly. "Nobody said we had to like what we do. She wasn't just a Sensitive, a receiver. She was a powerful selective sender, too. Hence the multiplying feedback effect. With her indoctrination, letting her go would have been suicide."

Khalid moved her shawl and felt for the pulse in her neck but it was still. He took off his cloak and covered her with it, then turned back to the Gadget, began cranking the generator.

"We haven't got all day," Nazar hissed.

Khalid ignored him.

Nazar made an exasperated sound. He had replaced the long knife in its hidden scabbard, now applied muscle to the generator. The output indicator moved, the light blinked on. From the earphones came the voice in the thunder with a new element, a continuous high thin shriek of pain and violation.

"If the old man's tuned it," Khalid said, "he'll be ready for us. We may be years too late already."

In his own ears his voice sounded as disembodied as the voice in the earphones. His body responded to the dictates of his will, his will to the dictates of logic, but all seemed remote, slowed down, unconnected to the inner self that listened to the accusing whisper—*murderer! murderer!*—to which he could find no response but

agreement and self-condemnation.

He helped repack the Gadget and the generator without impaired efficiency, or he would have heard from Nazar.

"Next time," he heard his voice say conversationally, "we must make sure they don't send anyone on a job like this with my undisciplined capacity for empathy."

They began manhandling the first crate out to the camels.

"If you had the intelligence of a mule," Nazar rasped, "you'd know that that's the quality you were chosen for. You're the closest thing to a Sensitive we could find. They thought you'd be more intuitive about people, so they put you in charge—not because the Amir's your uncle. They should have sent a halfwit."

Simon had all five animals saddled but his face was ashen and fearful. He must have seen the girl killed through the tent's opening. There was no time to try explaining to him. He jittered; the animals caught it, moved restively. When Khalid and Nazar brought the second crate out he helped secure it to the camel's pack saddle and went into the tent for the bedrolls. Nazar told him to forget the tent itself and the cloak and what lay under it. Khalid dug the revolvers out of the saddlebag, gave one to Nazar, heaved the bag across his shoulder, carried it out and tied it to the smaller camel's saddle.

The three men mounted their horses, Simon holding the lead camel's halter. The camels got to their feet with grumpy protests. Khalid's horse skittishly pirouetted. He controlled her, patted her neck, heard himself murmur automatic soothing words. Nazar told Simon to head back the way they had come as fast as was safe, and if he came to last night's camp site before they caught up with him to start down the gorge.

Simon left, forcing the protesting camels into a shambling trot. Khalid and Nazar watched until they had disappeared around the first bend in the trail.

Khalid sighed, drew a hanging corner of his headcloth across his chin, tucked it firmly into the looped black rope-like contrivance that held the headcloth in place. Then he broke open his revolver, spun the cylinder and checked the contents, aware of something compulsively delaying about what he was doing, closed the gun carefully with an empty chamber under the hammer and another before the first of the four cartridges. On closing, the cylinder spun one position further. Cocking the gun or pulling the trigger would spin it again and place a cartridge in firing position.

He was distantly surprised to see Nazar going through the same procedure.

"I'd feel safer using bow and arrow," Nazar muttered.

"So would I. But we have no more arrows. If these guns work they'll do more damage and help panic the crowd which is gathering." Again his horse tried to pirouette. He countered it with pressure from the bridle and the mare danced sideways half way across the camp ground clearing. Nazar's mount backed nervously out of the way.

The mare steadied. Khalid relaxed his grip on the reins, stuck the heavy revolver into the belt at his belly. Simultaneously he heard a sound like a thunderclap.

It was the sound they had heard through the earphones but a thousand times louder. With it the tent collapsed, was almost instantly snatched up as by a giant hand and shaken. The tent pegs came loose as though they had been embedded in soft mud. The tent flew like a wind-blown rag, the center pole a twig in a gale. All sailed overhead. The tent and Khalid's cloak fell into scrub oak and thornbush. Going end over end like a broken doll, the body of the girl landed where the camp ground narrowed to become the trail into the village. Through it all the voice from the earphones raged indistinctly.

For a while it was all Khalid and Nazar could do to keep their horses from bolting and themselves in the saddle.

"Huopponen accounts for physical manifestations," Nazar muttered. "I don't think he had that impressive a demonstration in mind. All that—from just one village?"

"There are five villages gathering here for the quarter-moon market, remember." If the old man had been preaching a paranoid psychotic deity, and had six fairly close-knit villages contributing to the telepathic energy pool . . . "Start with xenophobia, the religious wars started by foreigners with foreign-made Gadgets and foreign-made weapons—"

"Enough talk. Let's get it over with."

Khalid nodded. His horse was quieter now but quivering. He was still remote from himself. That had its advantages, anesthetizing feeling.

"As we planned, Nazar. From stationary horses, at point blank range. Otherwise we'll fail."

Nazar offered no objection to Khalid's going first.

The body where the trail began made Khalid's mare balk and shy away. He urged her forward and she suddenly lunged into a brief gallop, was as suddenly past what had frightened her and was slowing to a walk. Nazar's gelding repeated the performance, thudded

down the path, almost prompted the mare to break into another gallop. Khalid restrained her.

Sedately, they completed the distance through the trees. The trail widened and became the village street.

A crowd had gathered, all right. Men, women, children, perhaps a hundred of them. They were coming down the street toward them and at their head walked the old prophet. Out of the clear sky the thunder continued its endless echo with its blurred half-voiced commandment to kill and the agonized new overtone that was the sound the girl had not been able to make while dying.

The old man was hardly recognizable. He seemed to have shed forty years and his eyes blazed bright as the sky.

He stopped. Someone ran out in front of him, threw up a protective hand to ward off danger. Like the pseudopodia of a huge one-celled organism, the outer edges of the crowd surged forward. Khalid and Nazar were surrounded. But it was not a one-celled organism, it was one-minded, and the mind was that of the prophet, and the prophet was mad. He was also possessed. If he had not been tapping so much power for his charismatic use, Khalid would have expected another display like the one in the camp ground, with Nazar and himself at the focus of attention.

Nazar moved up beside him.

"Close enough?" he murmured.

"Almost."

"Hypocrites!" the old man shouted, and from the crowd came a muttered echo instantly re-echoed in the continuous echo of the thunder. "Machine men! Sinners against God and nature!"

Nazar lifted a hand, raised his voice to the crowd.

"We are nothing of the kind." He lowered his hand casually to the butt of the revolver protruding from the sash around his middle. "You can tell from my tongue and my dress that I am of the mountains myself. This old man is mad, and has misled you."

Khalid watched himself pull the revolver from his own belt and aim squarely at the old man's chest. He pulled the trigger, heard with distant resignation the dry heavy click of a misfire. He fired again, thought he had hit the old man's chest, but Nazar had fired at almost exactly the same time and split the prophet's skull like a melon fallen from the sky.

The horses reared in panic, plunged into the crowd. The unrelenting whisper *Murderer!* in his mind became a roar, but the unity of the crowd was shattered. The two forty-fives were probably louder than any godly thunder they had ever heard and the sound had

come from the hands of two men. Those who had been near enough had seen the result and were screaming it aloud, while others tried to impede or avoid the plunging horses. It was the panic Khalid had counted on. If it lasted a few more seconds they would be gone.

Khalid's horse had taken him to the edge of the crowd before he got it turned and headed back toward the trail. He was almost free of the people when he felt the heat rising in his revolver, looked and saw the barrel starting to glow, instinctively threw it away. It burst like a grenade. He kicked the horse's ribs, bent low, was barely aware of Nazar doing the same on the far side of the road, throwing his suddenly glowing revolver behind him. It too exploded. Then both horses were entering the trail side by side. Khalid reined in, allowing Nazar to go first, followed a stride behind him. A sudden gale-force wind whipped at the trees, uprooted one. It took too long to fall, crashed far enough behind them to barely brush Khalid's shoulders and his horse's croup with its outermost twigs and leaves. Then they were streaming across the camp ground, the air was still, the mulberry tree was behind them and they were pounding down the dusty track along the stream.

They had passed their lead camel, or what was left of it, lying battered and dead at the side of the track less than three hundred meters beyond the giant mulberry, the crates and everything inside them smashed flat as though by some giant fist. It was a fair guess that it had been a manifestation simultaneous to the one with the tent. Simon, they learned, had had the presence of mind to unloop the second camel's lead rope from the dead one's saddle and drag the animal behind him full tilt down the hill to where the little tributary met the Rowanduz river and then down the path that followed the Rowanduz to where it met the stream that came in from the plain.

They caught up with him as he started along the road leading on through the gorge. His face was mottled gray and yellow and his eyes were haunted. Nazar tried to explain what had been going on but gave up after two minutes. They heard no thunder-voice. There were no more manifestations.

At the third river they left the road and took the animals down to the water's edge to drink. There had been a bridge here too, a long time back. Its remains could be seen on either side, just above the point where the stream widened and became a deep, quiet pool that emptied its overflow without fuss or heavy current, running shallow over smooth steps of rock and jetting finally into space to

fall in cheerful sunbright indifference to the Rowanduz below.

Khalid squatted at the edge, tried to wash off the dried dirt and blood he had been spattered with. He stripped and dived into the water. It was icy, the shock almost restoring him to the body he had seemed so remote from. When he climbed out, Nazar was tearing a circle of day-old bread in two, offering him half.

He chewed thoughtfully, drying quickly in the mid-day sun.

"It made me as sick as it did you," Nazar said unexpectedly. "In the end he was just a pitiful old man, somebody's grandfather." He pushed the last piece of bread into his mouth, chewed and swallowed and went to the edge of the pool to drink. "At least it's over."

"You're sure? What happened to those two guns?"

"We'd used them in the killing. The crowd had already been worked up by their prophet and served as a psychokinetic lens, so to speak, focusing the energy of . . ."

"The crowd panicked. It couldn't focus anything. What about that lead camel, caught between the Gadget and the generator and whatever pounded them to scrap? Did the crowd know about them?"

"The girl did."

"She was dead. Granted that whatever she knew the god-mind knew. She did not know we sent the Gadget away ahead of us. Perhaps it sought it in the tent, perhaps it was looking for us. It's not really tuned in to us. Slow senses, you could say. But it found the camel and what it was carrying. It found and identified the two revolvers. It whipped up a wind to knock a tree down to stop us. It was a second too late. It's still a baby yet: not too much gross physical control."

Nazar stood up, shaking water from the hand he had used as a cup. His eyes were frightened.

"What you're telling me is that this projected entity has developed . . . volition? The capacity for independent action?"

"And is mad. A development of the Huopponen theories by Khalid the Assassin, failed deicide."

"Then what we did . . . had no value at all?"

"It may have speeded the growth of a system of theology, and given it an even bigger charge of paranoia than was already built in." Khalid was climbing into his clothes. "We've given them a good start on a list of martyrs."

". . . It hasn't followed us."

"Perhaps it needs to recharge its energies. Perhaps we're already beyond the boundaries of the prophet's influence, but I wouldn't count on that. Remember we'd heard of him in Nasiriyya. What we

have to do is get back home and find a way to kill a god without killing all its believers."

"Why?"

Nazar's fists clenched. Muscles in his jaw bunched. The simple man of action pose, Khalid though wearily.

"Because there are already too many of them, or soon will be."

Khalid stepped into his sandals. Nazar released a ragged breath.

"So what do we do now?"

Draping his headcloth over his head, Khalid fitted on the black looped headrope that held it in place.

"We're a long way from Nasiriyya," he said. "We try to get there before it does, and dig in for the new religious wars."

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AT THE HUGO BANQUET

by Susan Casper

This seems the right time for a small puzzle about the Annual Science Fiction Achievement Awards, familiarly known as the Hugos—named for Hugo Gernsback, who founded the first SF magazine, way back in 1926.

Five new writers met at the award banquet of the World Science Fiction Convention, where each was a nominee for an award in a different category: Novel, Novella, Novelette, Short Story, and Dramatic Work. The authors' last names (not in the same order as the categories) were Adams, Brown, Clark, Davis, and Ellis; their first names (not respectively) were Fred, Gail, Hank, Irene, and Joe; and the works they had written (in no particular order) were *ATTACK OF THE ZORCH*, *CLONED ALIVE*, *BETWEEN GALAXIES*, *ONE FOOT ON NEPTUNE*, and *ANDROMEDA WALTZ*. Only one of these authors won a Hugo for his work at the banquet, although an award was given in each category (the other nominees and their authors just weren't listed above). Can you, from the clues listed below, work out which first name goes with each last name, and which full name goes with which work, and who is the one author who won a Hugo?

1. Hank confided to Clark and Adams that of the other two's works, he thought the play was much worse than *ONE FOOT ON NEPTUNE*.

2. Irene came in second in her category.

3. The agent who handles Brown and Fred had high expectations for those clients and was disappointed that neither won.

4. Ellis and the playwright agreed that the awards were fair and that *BETWEEN GALAXIES* and the novelette were not as good as *CLONED ALIVE*, but came in higher than *ATTACK OF THE ZORCH*.

5. No one had expected Adams or *ANDROMEDA WALTZ* to win and in fact both placed very poorly in their categories, behind "no-award" in each.

6. The novelist won a Hugo. *ONE FOOT ON NEPTUNE* and the novella both placed second, and both Gail and the play finished last.

The solution appears on page 106.

THE BEANSTALK ANALYSIS

by J.O. Jeppson

art: Tim Kirk



Dr. Jeppson once worked next door to a demolition site. She is Director of Training at the William Alanson White Institute of Psychoanalysis, and she hopes that nobody there imagines that she belongs to the outrageous private club described below. Her novel, The Last Immortal, was recently published by Houghton-Mifflin.

Strange happenings within the field of psychoanalysis are bound to surface during the weekly luncheon meetings of the Psychoanalytic Alliance, referred to by the more uninhibited as Psshrinks Anonymous because of its strict rule that members must conceal the identities not only of their patients but also of themselves. This dangerously ecumenical club meets in a fading Manhattan hotel willing to risk its reputation with dubious clientele, and has always rented a private dining room in the sub-basement.

At a recent lunch, the Oldest Member—an unreconstructed Freudian—was holding forth as usual, drowning out the conversational attempts of the assembled Jungians, Adlerians, Kleinians, Ego Psychologists, and assorted other points of view.

"... I admit that the Master himself had a daughter, but letting in women as well as these new-fangled heresies ..."

"Women and heresies are hardly new, even here," muttered one of the members grizzled with Eclectic experience.

"... is a mistake," continued the Oldest Member, "because these new-fangled so-called analysts don't do orthodox depth therapy." He scowled at an Interpersonal over his cigar, unlit because this same Interpersonal had put through a no-smoking rule the previous week.

The Interpersonal smiled and crossed her legs. "Fortunately there's room for everything at Pshrink's Anonymous, including the right of a female member to present a case. . . ."

The Oldest Member gripped his cigar tighter and cleared his throat ominously. "Surely I have never recounted my series of successful cases dealing with the repressed sexual phobia implicit in cigar aversion manifested by certain female . . ."

"You have," said the Interpersonal, "here and—voluminously—in print. Now I am going to tell about a case that has had to be kept not only anonymous but—you must believe me, colleagues, unpublished."

"Unpublished!"

Even the Oldest Member was silenced.

I was just out of residency at the time [said the Interpersonal], renting a small office on the ground floor of an old converted Fifth Avenue town house. I was able to afford this prestigious address only because it was rapidly going downhill because of the long delay in completing the demolition of the building next door. I was working my way through analytic school, still paying off loans incurred while a psychiatric resident, and I needed patients.

One of my sources of referral was a well-established analyst known to Bellevue resident psychiatrists as Tailored Tweeds, who would send me patients so unsuitable for classical analysis that they could in good conscience be dumped on a mere stripling who was not only of the wrong sex but also of the wrong analytic persuasion.

When I took a history from my latest referral, it turned out that T.T. had actually treated him for several months, which meant one of two things: the patient had become too crazy or insolvent.

"My business is doing better than ever," said Mr. X, raising his voice over the demolition noise next door, "and I've remodeled a brownstone for my family. . . ."

I sighed, and then I sneezed.

"I suppose you're allergic to cigars too," said Mr. X, who had obeyed my non-smoking sign but still reeked of tobacco.

"Too?" I asked.

"My wife is allergic. That's why I'm in the mess I'm in."

"What mess?"

"My ex-shrink thinks I've become psychotic and said a change in therapy was indicated, preferably to the opposite sex to work out my hostility from and to my non-smoking wife."

"Do you think you're psychotic?"

"Well, I hallucinate."

"What?"

"I said I—"

"I heard you. What sort of things do you hallucinate?"

"Encounters with aliens from outer space."

"Tell me about it," I said reluctantly. I am an SF addict and do not approve of fringe elements invading the field.

"My wife says I've always been boringly sane, so what's happened has been a traumatic experience, especially since I only agreed to go into analysis because my wife couldn't stand my cigars and it was affecting our sex life."

"I seem to recall that your ex-analyst smokes," I said.

"Yes. Cigars. We spent a while analyzing my wife's sexual hang-ups shown in her aversion to smoking, but for some reason this didn't help in bed."

There was a loud crash next door and the patient quivered. "I think I'm having another hallucination. I imagine that there's a crack developing in your wall in back of that avocado plant next to the fireplace."

I turned to look. "You're right—there is a crack."

"It's a pity about these old mansions," said Mr. X, staring at the crack. "This one should be saved by the Landmarks Commission. I noticed the gargoyles when I came in. Of course, if that demolition damages your building structurally you'll have to move; and then I'll have to get used to another office and . . ."

"I thought you came to tell me about the hallucinations connected with your cigar smoking."

"You interrupted my free association!" said Mr. X plaintively. "Do all women analysts talk alot?"

I ground my teeth but remained silent, demonstrating that I, too, could play the classical analytic game.

After a few minutes Mr. X reached into his pocket and extracted two shiny objects resembling very large black beans. He dropped one of them into the small glass vase containing ivy that stood next to the inevitable box of Kleenex on the patient's table.

"See?" he said.

The water turned dirty gray, foamed, and quieted to reveal a heap of sediment on the bottom and wilting ivy on top.

"Now I've got only one left," said Mr. X. "Do I plant it? Is it real? Did you actually see the other bean dissolve?"

"I saw it, and my ivy is having a traumatic experience. Where did you get those beans?"

"A few nights ago I was up on the roof of our brownstone at about three A.M. because I couldn't sleep and that's the only place where my wife lets me smoke. I was sitting in the doorway because it was raining slightly, and my cigar went out, and there right in front of me was that damn Greek god my wife picked up during our last trip to Europe. It's a big obscene marble statue without even a figleaf—"

"You didn't like it?"

"I hated it. That night I had persuaded my wife to let me trade it in the morning to our neighbor for a birdbath he didn't like because it attracted pigeons, but my wife's crazy about pigeons and agreed because she wanted the birdbath—"

"What happened at three A.M.?"

"There I was sitting in the dark, undoubtedly full of primal hostility, when this funny patch of light, like a beach ball full of energy and lit up from inside, bumped along in the air and came to rest on the head of the statue and began to talk to me, not exactly in words, but . . ."

"Then how?"

"I don't know how. Meanings came into my mind but I can't remember them. The ball threw the beans at me and left, or died; anyway it wasn't there anymore."

"Is it possible that these beans were up on the roof to begin with and that you missed seeing them when you first went there?"

"You sound like my ex-shrink. If I'd seen the beans then I'd be certain I hallucinated the ball—I don't like the alternative."

"I see. The alternative is that a lighted beach ball actually talked to you."

"Yeah. You seem awfully young to handle a raving psychotic. What are you going to do for me, Doc?"

I didn't have time to tell him that I never answer that one. My intuition was working, as indicated by the tingling at the base of my spine. "I wonder if perhaps you haven't told me everything that happened," I said.

"Um. There were a lot of beans but they dissolved in the roof puddles. I rescued three before they got wet, and then I put one in a puddle to see if it would dissolve, and sure enough—"

"Isn't there something else?"

"You do interrupt a lot. Well, all right, I'll tell you, but don't laugh. That bastard of a beach ball said it wanted to make a trade for the statue, said I'd get something expensive. We sort of seemed to bargain; and I forgot all about the deal with my neighbor; and the next minute, whammo, the statue and the ball were gone and

there I was with two lousy beans, a missing art object, and a hostile wife."

At that moment my doorbell rang.

"My time is up," said Mr. X, leaping for the door like an escaping prisoner or possibly a well-trained patient. "It's Friday. Can you see me for an extra session tomorrow?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm going out of town. On Monday we'll continue discussing your problems about your wife. And the beans."

"Can I leave the last bean here? Maybe I wouldn't feel so crazy if somebody else took the responsibility for a while."

I nodded. He placed the bean on the soil of the avocado plant and went out smiling.

When I returned to my office Monday morning, I arrived early, as I always do after a weekend, to see if the plants needed watering.

The avocado didn't. It wasn't there, having been replaced by something which resembled a large beanstalk. Around the pot was a residue of water, possibly all that remained of the avocado, which had been a good-sized tree. The roots of the usurping stalk emerged from Mr. X's bean but did not actually enter the soil, extending instead horizontally to infiltrate the ceramic pot itself. Then they emerged onto the marble of the fireplace hearth. When I touched a root, it seemed to be anchored to the marble.

My first patient, also early, rang the doorbell; and there was no time to do anything definitive about the beanstalk, like putting in an emergency call to the New York Botanical Garden or consulting an exorcist. A busy young psychiatrist never has time to do anything definitive about anything, but does learn to act quickly in an emergency. I took the screen from around my typewriter table and used it to conceal the fireplace and its beanstalk.

By the time Mr. X arrived for his afternoon appointment, the beanstalk was thicker, tightly wound, and reached the ceiling. The roots covered the fireplace in every direction, apparently ingesting and digesting the marble with ease.

With the screen removed, Mr. X and I surveyed the beanstalk.

"I think I'm having a traumatic experience," he said through pallid lips. "May I smoke? Please?"

"Oh, what the hell," I said. "Go ahead."

There was another crash from the demolition and the crack in the wall widened. Mr. X shuddered and lit up.

I sneezed. The beanstalk uncoiled. It was much larger than I had realized.

Mr. X puffed nervously on his cigar. I coughed. Vibrating, the

beanstalk slowly bent down from the ceiling, as if searching for a way out, and suddenly the top of it dived into the fireplace. Downwards.

"It's drilling through!" cried my patient. "Tell me this isn't really happening!"

Before I could answer, he had thrown his cigar onto the beanstalk in what may have been a hostile act.

At once the plant whipped around and grabbed both Mr. X and me with lashing branches that bound us feet first to separate sections of the stalk. The tip of the plant began to tunnel rapidly into the basement below, and as the plant's leaf-like structures closed around the length of the stalk—protecting us humans, perhaps incidentally—I saw from inside that the drilling tip had become an everted nose-cone which thrust down and down . . .

"I trust you're not going to indulge in Freudian implications, m'dear," said one of her older colleagues.]

"Oddly enough, some events seem to be indubitably Freudian," replied the Interpersonal.]

While the plant—or whatever it was—grew rapidly from all the marble, brick, and cement ingested on the way to the foundations of my building, I was not able to discuss this phenomenon because one of the tendrils had wrapped around my throat, preventing me from speaking. Mr. X was not so inhibited.

"Straight into the unconscious!" he shouted. "At last, a real depth experience!" He began to chortle like a case of back-ward dementia or a Pshrink who is writing a scathing review of another Pshrink's book.

I tried to reply but succeeded only in gurgling.

"What? Did you ask me what I mean by that?" he said, putting words into the therapist's mouth as they all do. "I don't know. Is it a punishment nightmare? About my sexual problems with my wife? About my erotic transference to you? The effects of smoking? It's a good thing none of this is really happening because if it were, how would we get rescued?"

How, indeed? People would assume that the demolition next door had accidentally destroyed us along with my building. No one would know that an alien plant had taken two humans with it to wherever it was going. If it needed hard minerals to eat, it might go straight through the granite under Manhattan, getting bigger as it went, perhaps to revel in the hot basalt under the granite, feeding on the entire rocky part of planet Earth.

I shut my eyes against the dust. Mr. X, still talking, had switched

to believing he was in a particularly symbolic dream which he proceeded to interpret in a way that would have made Freud stroke his beard thoughtfully. I do not have time to recount this interpretation, which was in any event contrary to my theoretical point of view.

Suddenly there was a tremendous vibration in the beanstalk, the forward section of which was already well beneath the foundations. The stalk coiled against itself like a spring winding up, and just before I thought I would be squeezed to death, the spring let loose, shooting Mr. X and myself back up the beanhole into my office.

Mr. X staggered onto my couch just as the demolition engineer looked through the hole where my fireplace used to be, and apologized for having, he thought, broken through our wall.

Mr. X blinked his eyes, thanked the engineer, and announced that he was cured. He said that the structural trauma to his analyst's office had miraculously freed him from his neurotic problems, which he dimly remembered as stemming from an allergy to beans.

When Mr. X sent his check in the mail some weeks later, he enclosed a note thanking me effusively for the best short-term therapy since Freud. Not only had he completely lost any desire to smoke, but his sex life had improved to the point of being outstanding.

There was profound silence in the dining room of Pshrink's Anonymous until the Oldest Member unclamped his teeth from his cigar, and said, "The speaker should not have discharged the patient from treatment since the return to the womb aspects of the problem were never analyzed but only acted out. I've always said that you can never tell what's going to happen with improper non-classical technique . . ."

A fierce argument promptly ensued among dissident analytic sects, not for the first time at Pshrink's Anonymous. It was cut short when the youngest member spoke. He was only a first-year resident at Bellevue Psycho (there's always one as a token example of the younger generation), and therefore it was to be expected that he would not be able to concentrate on theoretical essentials.

"I'd like to know," he said, "if that plant is down chomping on the bowels of our planet right now."

The Interpersonal shook her head. "The beanstalk ran into the same problem they were having at the demolition site. The long delays were due to the fact that every time the excavators dug beneath the old foundations they ran into one of those buried

streams that are found throughout Manhattan. I understand that the new building erected in that location still has times when the underground garage gets flooded."

"Then did the alien plant—"

"When I inspected the hole in our basement, I discovered that our visitor from, presumably, outer space had reached the underground stream and dissolved. Cigar smoke wasn't the only thing lethal to its physiology."

The Interpersonal smiled at the Oldest Member and added, "Soon there was no evidence left of any alien; but I defy any alienist here to describe a better case of depth analysis."

They all began to speak at once.



HARRISON'S RAT

Abracadabra, Dad!
Dear Harry Harrison
Dabbled in alchemy;
Wealth it begat.

Here is the evidence:
Incontrovertibly
He has made gold from a
Stainless Steel Rat.

—Claire Mahan

HEISENBERG'S DATE

Hickory, dickory,
W. Heisenberg
Told us, for certain, un-
Certainty's great.

How in the world will we
Celebrate Heisenberg's
Sesquicentennial
On the right date?

—Marion H. Smith

IS THE WORLD IN CURIOUS SHAPE?

by Robert J. Schadewald

art: Jack Gaughan



The author is a full-time freelance science and technical writer. Magazine articles and technical manuals have been his mainstays, but he also wants to write books about the frontiers and fringes of science. He considers himself a Fortean, though an extremely skeptical one. He's interested in firewalking (and has tried it), creatures in Loch Ness (which he is doubtful about), and earthquake lights (genuine). And he's something of an authority on rains of fish.

There's no cure for insomnia quite like a lecture on geodesy, the science of measuring the earth. Surveyors and satellite trackers and a few others perspire for precision, speaking solemnly about oblate spheroids and gravitational anomalies. The rest of us are content to think of the Earth as a ball of rock and whatever about 8,000 miles in diameter.

Well, *most* of the rest of us. There are minority opinions about everything, including the shape and composition of the Earth. Of all the alternative theories of geodesy, three have gained reasonably large followings in the United States; and each was once headquartered in northeastern Illinois. Koresh, a turn-of-the-century Chicago prophet, told his followers that the Earth is a hollow sphere and we live *on the inside of it*. Later, Marshall B. Gardner of Aurora theorized that the Earth is a hollow sphere, but we live on the outside. In the 1920s, Wilbur Glenn Voliva and his followers in Zion loudly proclaimed that the Earth is flat.

All three theories are still flourishing.

Cyrus Reed Teed, the man who became Koresh, was born on a New York farm in 1839. Teed served in a field hospital unit of the Union army during the Civil War. Later, he attended New York Eclectic Medical College, an unconventional school specializing in herb remedies. Upon graduation, Dr. Teed established a practice in Utica, New York. There, besides concocting his herb remedies, he dabbled in alchemy. Alone one night in his laboratory, he had a vision in which a beautiful woman revealed the secret of the cosmos to him. She told him he was on the inside. Dr. Teed exchanged Cyrus for its Hebrew equivalent, Koresh, and set out to reshape the world.

Koresh described the shape of the world in *The Cellular Cosmogony* (editions of 1870, 1898, 1905, 1922, and 1951). He claimed that the conventional globe accurately depicts the Earth, except for one thing: you have to turn it inside out! The Indian Ocean is indeed on the opposite side of the earth from America, but straight *up*, not straight down. We could look up and see most of the rest of the earth if it weren't for the dense, distorting atmosphere. We are actually on the inside of a cosmic egg, Koresh claimed, but complicated laws of perspective and atmospheric refraction make the Earth's surface appear to curve the other way.

The Koreshan system was worked out in detail. To start at the outside and work in, we begin with nothing. Outside the Earth, there is absolutely nothing, perhaps not even space. (This vaguely parallels General Relativity, which holds that space and time can't

exist without matter or energy.) The outer shell of the Earth begins with seven metallic layers, with the noble metals gold and silver first. Five mineral strata lie inside the layers of metal. The familiar earth and water lie inside the minerals.

Above us are three layers of atmosphere, each containing stars which are merely "focal points of substance or centers of combustion." Inside the atmospheres is a solar sphere and, in the very middle, the stellar sphere. The Sun and Moon we see are not real objects, but are images formed on the first atmosphere by the real sun, which is half light and half dark. The planets are "spheres of substance aggregated through the impact of afferent and efferent fluxions of essence." Whatever that means.

Koresh was a small man with blazing eyes and an air of absolute self-assurance. An electrifying orator, he made a lasting (though not always favorable) impression on all who heard him. Koresh claimed to be a new messiah, and he sometimes dropped broad hints about his remarkable powers. Women found him irresistible.*

For several years, Koresh travelled around the country lecturing on his theories. When he reached Chicago in 1886, the enthusiastic reception he received encouraged him to stay. He founded a communal group called the Koreshan Unity, and money and converts flowed in. The Unity established the College of Life and published two magazines, *The Guiding Star* and *The Flaming Sword*. These promoted Koreshan Universology, a strange conglomeration of off-beat religion, radical politics, and pseudoscience, of which the Cellular Cosmogony theory was only a small part.

Small part or not, the Cellular Cosmogony was crucial to Koreshanity; and Koresh knew it would take evidence to convince the skeptics of its truth. With that in mind, on July 25, 1896, he sent his secret weapon, Professor Ulysses G. Morrow, to the Old Illinois and Michigan Drainage Canal to determine experimentally whether its waters were concave or convex.

Ulysses G. Morrow, former shorthand teacher and part-time-preacher, was a fallen-away flat-earthier, whose defection had shaken the flat-earth movement. Morrow knew about several experiments performed by British flat-earthiers at the Old Bedford Canal, north of London. (For a description of one of these, see my "He Knew Earth Is Round, but His Proof Fell Flat," *Smithsonian* April 1978.) The experiment he devised to prove the Earth concave was nearly a carbon copy of them.

*Except his wife: she left him.

A perfectly straight section of the Old Illinois and Michigan Drainage Canal ran northeast from Summit, Illinois, just outside of Chicago. Near Summit, the Koreshan geodesists drove a stake into the canal bottom and attached a twenty-two-inch disk to the stake with its center eighteen inches above the water. Morrow and his assistants got into a boat and rowed three miles down the canal, where they set up a telescope a foot above the water. Atmospheric refraction functioned wonderfully, and the entire disk was visible. Geometrically, all but the upper five inches should have been below the horizon. Thus encouraged, they rowed two more miles and tried again. Although the disk was by now a couple feet below the water horizon, it was again entirely visible. Morrow and company repeated the observations in the opposite direction with equally satisfactory results.

Morrow, already editor of the *Guiding Star*, now became the leading Koreshan geodesist. He organized several other geodesic experiments; and, when a new edition of *The Cellular Cosmogony* was published in 1898, it was Morrow who wrote the section entitled "The New Geodesy." He shamelessly pillaged flat-earth literature, bending "flat" arguments until they were concave.

Meanwhile, Chicago medical authorities were getting downright stuffy about Dr. Teed's medical pretensions, and the doctor prescribed a change of climate for himself. In 1897, he and most of his followers moved to the Gulf Coast of Florida, where they founded the town of Estero, also called "the New Jerusalem." Koresh expected millions of converts to flock to the city, but few showed up. The prophet died in 1908. Though he failed to rise from the dead as he had predicted, his followers didn't lose faith. The little colony struggled on until at least the 1950s.

A few years after the death of Koresh, Marshall Blutchter Gardner began promoting another version of the hollow-earth theory. Gardner, a heavy, lantern-jawed man, was in charge of machinery maintenance in a corset factory in Aurora, Illinois, thirty-five miles east of Chicago. He first published his views in 1913, in a 68-page book entitled *A Journey to the Earth's Interior, or Have the Poles Really Been Discovered?*

Gardner believed in the conventional spherical earth up to a limit, the limit being about eighty degrees north and south latitude. There, he believed the Earth's surface curves gently inward, folding back on itself to form a spherical shell about 800 miles thick. Since this would leave openings 1,400 miles in diameter at both poles, Gardner

claimed that Cook, Peary, Amundsen, Scott, and other polar explorers either fibbed about their discoveries or were misled by their navigation instruments. Certainly none of them reported looking into the interior and seeing a central sun 600 miles in diameter illuminating continents and oceans there.

Gardner claimed that substantial evidence supports his theory. For instance, the aurora borealis (northern lights) might be light from the central sun reflecting off the atmosphere above the northern hole. What look like polar caps on Mars could be the same thing. The frozen mammoths found buried in the Siberian tundra might have wandered out of their warm inner world and frozen to death. The Eskimos might be descendants of people who ventured out and lost their way. The erratic behavior of compasses at high latitudes could be due to the close proximity of the openings. Early explorers of the Arctic reported several observations—animals apparently migrating northward, warm winds from the north, etc.—which are neatly explained by the theory. Gardner even thought that some explorers actually went part way into the openings without noticing it.

This type of hollow-earth theory is far from new. Edmund Halley, of comet fame, had suggested in 1716 that the Earth might consist of several hollow spheres, one inside the other, with the spaces between them lighted by "peculiar luminaries." Cotton Mather was impressed by the idea and defended it in his *Christian Philosophy*. Later, Captain John Cleves Symmes, hero of the War of 1812 and nephew of the founder of Cincinnati, expanded the theory and added large polar openings to the spheres. Symmes wanted to lead a hundred-man expedition from Siberia to the inner earth; and, in 1822 and 1823, he made several appeals to Congress for financing. Though deluged with petitions from Symmes's supporters, Congress respectfully declined.

"Some very unintelligent readers have accused us of putting forward a theory that is not new but merely a rehash of Symmes's Theory of Concentric Spheres," complained Gardner in his 456-page second edition, published in 1920. He went on to hotly deny the charge. After all, he claimed the Earth was a hollow spherical shell surrounding a central sun. Symmes had proposed five concentric shells and no interior sun.

In fact, Gardner might not have heard of Symmes when he published his 1913 edition. He apparently plagiarized most of it from William Reed's 1906 book *The Phantom of the Poles*, and Reed never mentioned Symmes. Gardner certainly wasn't aware that a sub-

stantial corpus of hollow-earth literature—more than a dozen books, pamphlets and articles—preceded the work he pirated. Thus he couldn't know that Reed's book was also unoriginal. Although Symmes himself wrote nothing, the arguments that he used in his lectures were published by his followers and then endlessly recycled and adapted. Symmes's four inner spheres were considered excess baggage by many of his admirers, one of whom, Alexander Mitchell, apparently discarded them by 1826. As for Gardner, his only important contribution to hollow-earth theory is the central sun.

Still, except for Symmes himself, Gardner was probably more influential than any of his predecessors. His monumental 1920 edition, though still largely derivative, was certainly the largest collection of hollow-earth arguments published up to that time. Though he didn't stump the countryside for support, Gardner was a prolific letter writer, and he got a certain amount of attention from newspapers. He also publicized his ideas by sending free copies of his books to major libraries and to influential people all over the world.

In his second edition, Gardner described some of the reactions he got from recipients of free copies of the first edition. Minor officials of the royal houses of Sweden and Italy dutifully sent thank-you notes. Gardner considered these virtually royal endorsements. Arthur Conan Doyle took time out from his pursuit of fairies to write that, if it weren't that the poles had actually been discovered, he'd be a convert. And a college professor, tongue firmly in cheek, allowed that Gardner's book compared favorably with the work of Ferguson. The flattered author obviously didn't know that he was being compared to Orlando Ferguson, a flat-earthier.

On the whole, Gardner believed that he and his ideas were shabbily treated. He longed to see the Stars and Stripes planted in the inner world, both to confirm his own genius and to keep other nations out. He was irked when no expeditions embarked. He believed that there were rich lands inside which could easily feed the outer world's hungry multitudes. However, his theory offered neither security nor salvation; and it only attracted a modest following during his lifetime, which ended in 1937. By then, Byrd had flown over both poles without seeing any holes; but Gardner still believed that his theory had merit.

Last, but hardly least of the Illinois geodesists, was Wilbur Glenn Voliva, America's best known flat-earthier. Voliva was born in Indiana in 1870 and grew up on a farm. He began preaching at sixteen,

was ordained at nineteen, and subsequently continued his studies of theology at four different colleges. He served as pastor of several New Light churches; but, in 1899, he joined the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church of Zion, a faith-healing-and-fundamentalism sect headed by John Alexander Dowie. In 1906, he replaced Dowie as General Overseer of the church, then headquartered in Zion, Illinois. Sometime afterward, Zion schools began teaching that the Earth is flat.

Voliva believed that the Earth is shaped like a giant flapjack, a circular disk with the north pole at the center and a 150-foot wall of ice at the rim, the "southern limit." (Obviously you can sail around this world, and Voliva did.) He thought that the Sun was only 1500 miles up and only 32 miles in diameter. The Moon, about the same size, shines by its own light. Lunar eclipses are caused by an unseen dark body passing in front of the Moon. A special law of perspective allows ships to apparently sail over a nonexistent horizon, and this law combines forces with a special law of refraction to cause the apparent rising and setting of celestial bodies.

It's not clear exactly when Voliva rejected the spherical earth, but it's obvious why. He took his Bible seriously—"I'm the only man in the world that literally believes it."—and felt that the Biblical descriptions of the Earth don't fit a sphere. Isaiah 40:22 says, "God sits enthroned on the vaulted roof of Earth," and Voliva took the verse literally. Other Bible verses refer to the Earth's foundations, ends, and corners. To Voliva, there was no question that the Earth is flat; and he had a standing offer of \$5,000 to anyone who could prove to him that it wasn't. No one ever collected.

Voliva was correct in believing that the ancient Hebrews considered the Earth flat. So did the Egyptians and Babylonians. The spherical opinion espoused by Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Ptolemy eventually prevailed, although some of the Fathers of the Church fulminated against it. By the time Columbus sailed, few educated people doubted that the earth is round. The system Voliva promoted (and which Morrow earlier abandoned for the Cellular Cosmogony) differed in several respects from the ancient Hebrew cosmology. And, far from being ancient, it was devised by an English snake-oil salesman, Samuel Birley Rowbotham, in the middle of the 19th century.

Rowbotham, who at various times called himself Tryon, S. Goulden, "Parallax," or Dr. Birley, always called his system "zetetic astronomy." For 45 years, from 1849 until his death in 1884, Rowbotham crisscrossed England lecturing on zetetic astronomy. The

word "zetetic," he would tell his listeners, comes from the Greek *zetetikos*, meaning to seek or inquire. He claimed to inquire only after facts, leaving mere theories to the likes of Copernicus and Newton. Many of his "facts" came straight from the Bible. Rowbotham wrote several books and pamphlets, the best known being his 432-page second edition of *Earth not a Globe*, published in 1873 under the pseudonym "Parallax." In his later years, he became wealthy selling "Dr. Birley's Phosphorized Medicine," a worthless concoction of sugar water and phosphoric acid.

When Rowbotham died in 1884, he left behind a large and vociferous group of followers. The movement continued to gather steam and peaked in the mid 1890s under the Universal Zetetic Society. The U.Z.S. had a corps of lecturers stumping England and Ireland promulgating the plane truth. Its official journal, the *Earth-Not a Globe-Review*, was distributed throughout the English-speaking world (Morrow was once a U.S. agent for it). Members wrote books and pamphlets; and one, the redoubtable Lady Elizabeth Anne Mould Blount, wrote a flat-earth novel, a flat-earth operetta, and the *Earth not a Globe Waltz!*

It was this tradition that Voliva inherited. The British flat-earth movement faded rapidly after the turn of the century and apparently died in World War One. The seeds it had planted in America took root and blossomed, but randomly. While individual flat-earthers lectured and wrote books or pamphlets, there was no flat-earth organization of any consequence. Then, under Voliva, the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church of Zion grew to include thousands of members worldwide. All were, at least nominally, flat-earthers.

Ironically, this, the largest flat-earth organization of modern times, was intellectually barren. Though Voliva's planely worded radio broadcasts brought him national notoriety, neither he nor any of his followers ever wrote a flat-earth book, or even a pamphlet. Voliva did devote the entire May 10, 1930, issue of the sect's periodical, *Leaves of Healing*, to flat-earth arguments; but these were mostly lifted from the 19th-century British flat-earth literature.

Perhaps Voliva was too busy with other things. When he took over in 1906, Zion and Zion Industries were bankrupt; and he had to get them out of hock. Though he held no political office, he ran Zion with an iron hand; and smoking, drinking, swearing, gambling, and other forms of fun were not permitted. He had far-flung missions to manage and Methodists to persecute. There were government investigations, court battles, and the Great Depression. On top of all this, he had to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ, which

he believed would be in 1936. By the time the latter event failed to materialize, his political influence had waned; but Voliva was still the spiritual head of his church at his death in 1942.

Voliva, Teed, and Gardner were absolutely sincere in their beliefs, and they couldn't understand why others didn't readily accept their arguments. All three felt misunderstood and persecuted. Teed and Voliva both believed they were divinely appointed, literally prophets without honor. Gardner merely believed that he had made the most important geographical discovery since Columbus without ever leaving his armchair. If all three could be resurrected for a round-table discussion of the shape of the Earth, each would probably refuse on the grounds that the other two were crackpots.

Why can such theories attract a following? Well, some people are merely rebellious and like to believe that, whatever the accepted idea is, it's wrong. Also, such theories may reinforce a cherished belief, still a hidden fear, or fulfill a secret fantasy.

Does the idea of a virtually infinite universe, extending untold light years in every direction, make you feel insignificant? Try Dr. Teed's hollow world, and limit your universe to 8,000 miles in diameter. If you are a Freudian, you get the added bonus of symbolically returning to the womb.

Were you intrigued by Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World*? Do you have fantasies about undiscovered lands where prehistoric animals still live, and of the glory sure to fall on the explorers who discover them? Then take an ego trip with Gardner to the center of the world.

Does the idea of Earth whirling through space at nineteen miles per second make you dizzy? Do you feel that a strict reading of your Bible *requires* the Earth to be flat, in spite of Magellan, NASA, and a million smart-alec scientists? Then perhaps you should accept Voliva's flat Earth.

As mentioned earlier, all three ideas are very much alive.

The original Koreshans have pretty well died out in America, but the idea was transplanted to Germany after World War One, and it later flourished under the Nazis. The *HohlweltLehre* still survives in Germany, and it has been exported back to the United States. Bio-Tech Research in Nevada City, California, is promoting a translation of the German book *Space and the Universe* by F. Braun.

Ironically, in spite of polar-orbiting satellites, Gardner's hollow Earth has a wider acceptance now than it did during his lifetime. The late Ray Palmer, former science-fiction writer and editor, used

to promote the theory in his *Flying Saucers* magazine as the solution to the UFO mystery. There are at least half a dozen hollow-earth books currently in print, including *Secret of the Ages: UFOs from Inside the Earth* by Brinsley Le Poer Trench, a member of the British House of Lords. At last report, two expeditions to the inner earth were being planned, one through the northern opening and one through the southern.

Last, but certainly not least, is the flat-earth movement, headquartered in Lancaster, California. Charles Johnson, president of the International Flat Earth Research Society, is absolutely on the level. Through the pages of the *Flat Earth News*, he editorially blasts the space program and predicts the ultimate triumph of the Plane Truth.

THE SOLUTION TO AT THE HUGO BANQUET (from page 88)

By clue 5, *ANDROMEDA WALTZ* and Adams's work must be at least third or lower (since an award was given in each category); they must be Gail's work and the play (clue 6). Since Adams did not write the play (clue 1), she must be Gail and the play is *ANDROMEDA WALTZ*.

The play was not written by Hank (clue 1), Irene (clue 2), or Fred (clues 3 & 5). It is therefore Joe's, whose last name is not Clark (clue 1), or Brown (clue 3), or Ellis (clue 4). He is Davis.

Gail Adams did not write the novel or novella (clue 6), or the novelette (clue 4). She instead wrote the short story, which wasn't *ONE FOOT ON NEPTUNE* (clue 6), or *BETWEEN GALAXIES* or *CLONED ALIVE* (clue 4). It was *ATTACK OF THE ZORCH*.

By clues 4 & 6, *CLONED ALIVE* must be the novel which wasn't Irene's (clue 2), or Fred's (clue 3); therefore it was Hank who isn't Clark (clue 1), or Brown (clue 3), so he is Ellis.

Fred is not Brown (clue 3), so he is Clark. He did not write *ONE FOOT ON NEPTUNE* (clue 1), so he wrote *BETWEEN GALAXIES*, which must be the novella (clue 6).

And this leaves Irene Brown as the writer of the novelette *ONE FOOT ON NEPTUNE*. Since the novel won the Hugo (clue 6), Hank Ellis is the one Hugo winner of the group.

Hank Ellis wrote the novel *CLONED ALIVE*.

Fred Clark wrote the novella *BETWEEN GALAXIES*.

Irene Brown wrote the novelette *ONE FOOT ON NEPTUNE*.

Gail Adams wrote the short story *ATTACK OF THE ZORCH*.

Joe Davis wrote the play *ANDROMEDA WALTZ*.

CHECKMATE

by Edward Wellen
art: Freff



Since the last time he appeared in these pages, Mr. Wellen has sold several of his mysteries to West German TV for adaptation. He says that much of his best writing effort has gone into correspondence with the bureaucracy of the State of New York. However, he still has time to write SF and mystery stories—here is his latest.

Their chemistry was all wrong. They were college classmates, but that was their only bond. She was an ox-eyed Juno, he a bromide grind.

Bonnie Oakley recognized the difference if Vernon Gardner did not. When Vernon ventured to inform her that he loved her, something she took for granted, and when he compounded that by propositioning her, she did not say, "Get lost, you creep." But that was the burden of her response. Because she *did* say, could not resist saying, "Maybe if you were the last man on earth . . ."

Vernon *got* lost, in a sense. He buried himself deeper in his premed studies, so that Bonnie stopped seeing him around campus and indeed quite soon quite forgot he had ever existed. She heard of him once again, during their last year, when there was some strain over a missing or mislabeled batch of bacillus, but Vernon dropped out and spared everyone the embarrassment of his presence.

Next time his name popped up in Bonnie's hearing was a full ten years later, when the class politician instigated a class reunion. Vernon was among those who had the grace not to show up. Someone brought up his name and Bonnie spilled her drink laughing. It was surprise more than anything. She hadn't thought of him once in all those years. Someone else mentioned having seen Vernon only lately, in, of all places, Chemrem, the proprietary drug firm, where Vernon seemed to be, of all things, the laboratory janitor; the speaker had done Vernon the politeness of not openly recognizing him.

That was the first and last class reunion. That fall marked the end of all reunions and the beginning of a wholly altered world. In this new world the survivors dared not wallow in nostalgia; nostalgia was too much like self-pity. The commemorators had hardly scattered to their homes when Checkmate struck.

"Checkmate," some headline-writer called the plague, and the name stuck. The disease spread with Concorde speed. It was no localized Egyptian plague. It left no spot on Earth untouched. Human males of all ages, climes, and persuasions dropped like sprayed flies.

Terrible. But everything always happens to other people, so it did not really come home to a benumbed Bonnie, even after she had served her turn on burial details, till her own lover died.

Lyle Pressmar was one of the last to go, so she had hoped against hope. But Lyle, like all the others, came down with what at first seemed only a cold. Then he sank into a coma and died.

At least it was a painless death. For Lyle. Not for Bonnie. She

took it hard.

No use railing against fate, though. Like her sisters she had to face the new reality and struggle to keep the lessened organic whole going.

A ranking biochemist, ranking even higher with the competition more than halved, Bonnie understood the implications better than most. She wondered if the world of women could apply parthenogenesis and cloning before the line ran out.

If so, could parthenogenesis and cloning ever truly replace the lost joy and sorrow of heterosex? Meanwhile, for non-lesbians, there was only one hope.

The glad whisper went around that the world was not wholly manless. Somewhere a man lived. One human male in his potent thirties, somehow immune to the Checkmate virus, survived.

Bonnie took this drop of honey with a grain of salt. It was only natural that such a myth should spring up. The world needed a dream figure. It would not be long before this mythical male began to take on superhuman attributes. Everyone's father figure, brother figure, son figure, lover figure, he would have to be larger than life, better than life, truer than life, intenser than life. Bonnie smiled wistfully. If there were such a man, the poor fellow would have a lot to live up to.

But then the myth picked up a name. Unless the whisper garbled it in transmission, the name was Vernon Gardner.

A bell rang, of course, but it took Bonnie a while to unblock her mind and realize that *the* Vernon Gardner was *her* Vernon Gardner.

And it took her a while longer to see that the Checkmate catastrophe had not been a chance mutation of a virus, one of evolution's grimmer jokes. It was manmade. Done unto man by man. She lay awake thinking.

She had caused it. Hadn't she told the creep, "Maybe if you were the last man on earth . . . "?

Vernon had taken her at her word. It was all just too pat to be coincidental.

Bonnie swelled with fury. She was unlikely ever to swell with child. Even sperm deposited in sperm banks had, upon withdrawal, succumbed to Checkmate. Thinking of that, she froze herself into a cold rage.

Bonnie directed the icicle at Vernon. He was a monster, the greatest monster in human history, out-Hitlering Hitler. And out-Cain-ing Cain. Cain, way back there at the beginning, had after all killed only one-fourth of the human race. That might once have been one

for the Genesis book of records, but Vernon had broken the record: he had murdered half.

He had murdered Lyle.

Bonnie had the Chemrem lead. She would hunt Vernon down.

With even essential services curtailed, every workwoman counted. Slackers drew scowls and, if that did not work, short rations. Bonnie's current assignment was to keep a sewage-treatment plant going. She hadn't taken a day off in months. She told herself she was entitled. She called in sick.

Sometimes it paid not to think ahead. Bonnie kept her mind blank as she dressed. She looked in the mirror before going out. She frowned on finding that she had without thinking pinned a butterfly pin to her jacket. And she on a grim mission! But she left it on and made up for it by deepening her frown. The pin could serve as a weapon. Not that she needed a weapon; she was a black belt. She felt sure she could take Vernon if he was no more formidable than the creepy Vernon of old.

Her face unfroze at the first feeling of spring in the air. Good to get out in the open. A three blocks' walk brought her to the thruway.

She thumbed a ride on a rig hauling melons to market. Happy to have someone spell her at the wheel, the driver asked no probing questions. Everyone had a sad story; no need to hear a variant.

The trucker brought up the myth. "Say, did you know there's still a guy somewheres around? Boy, would I like to get him to myself for even a one-night stand. Keep your eyes peeled, sister. Last I heard, he's up where we're headed."

"You don't say."

"It doesn't give you a lift? You're a cool one." The trucker fell silent and shot glances at Bonnie.

They listened to CB chatter as the rig ate up the miles. For the moment, women feared no enemies foreign or domestic. Sisterhood reigned. With the standing down of what was left of standing armies, the demobs had taken over policing, mostly a matter of traffic control. Maybe later a few macho women would come to the fore and start the territorial business all over again, the having and holding of turf, but for now the only worry was to keep goods moving smoothly. The trucker nodded knowingly as they crossed into Virginia. She told Bonnie that a hardnosed ex-colonel ran this sector, that along this stretch Mama Bear had a heavy paw. Sure enough, the CB warned, and the rig breezed innocently at legal speed past a radar trap. The trucker hummed in triumph and as soon as it was safe picked up speed. The rig hummed a monotonously rapid hum

of its own.

Feeling full, with an unsatisfying fullness, Bonnie stowed melon rind in a plastic bag for later disposal at a recycling point. She ached with the wish that the men could have been here to see how clean the women kept the place.

She made ready to spell the trucker again but the sister shook her head.

"Thanks to you I'm running way ahead of schedule. If you like we can pull up at the next motel and sign in."

Bonnie knew it was foolish to be so uptight. Maybe in time she would get over feeling uncomfortable whenever she found herself on the receiving end of a pass. But the time was not yet. She twitched a smile.

"Thanks, but I have to keep going."

The trucker shrugged. "It was just a thought."

They traveled in convoy for a while and the CB banter took the chill off. Sisterhood solidarity. Then someone touched on the myth of the surviving male. Lusty lying blued the air. But soon the CB chatter faded as though lured into silence by memory. They drove into night.

The trucker was first to spot a sister walking a male Great Dane along the shoulder. The trucker grinned, slowed the rig, and leaned out of the cab to shout. "There are laws against that." The sister slackened the leash to cut a hand into an elbow. The rig picked up speed again, the trucker chuckling. The chuckling died and a sullen silence grew.

Further along, a neon sign—*The Tomcat*—caught Bonnie's eye; the trucker caught that and nodded toward the place.

"A hook-joint where they all dress up real butch. If you swing that way I can drop you off."

"No, thanks."

All the same the rig rolled to a stop. Bonnie slid her hand to her butterfly pin. The trucker avoided Bonnie's eyes.

"I been hearing rattling noises. I better check him." Funny how all modes of transport, even ships, were now "he." The trucker's voice roughened. "You got some kind of deadline up ahead so you'd do better not to wait on me. You can easy hitch another ride from here."

"Right. Thanks for the lift."

"My pleasure."

"So long, sister."

"So long, sister."

The Chemrem plant for the most part was operating at half capacity. No need now for men's toiletries and such. And the sisters had more pressing wants than nail polish, rouge, and eyeshadow. To say nothing of The Pill. But the plant still turned out the same amount of uppers and downers, the sisters having doubled their consumption.

Even with controlled substances on the premises, there seemed small call to fret about ripoffs. Sisterhood.

Behaving as if she belonged, Bonnie followed arrows straight to the unmanned—unmanned!—personnel office. The files would show where Vernon Gardner lived at the time of his employment here. She entered and the fluorescents switched on.

Sitting down to retrieve his card from the revolving file, she gave in to weariness and slumped blankly a moment. Hitching rides had not been all that easy. She had run into a wildcat strike of truckers protesting the two speed limits—the 55-mph one and the 30-mg. one. The sisters had resolved it, but only after the roads had been tied up for all of eight hours.

She punched up the Gs and riffled through the cards. She failed to turn up his name. She went through the file twice more, card by card, before giving up on personnel. Vernon Gardner's card was missing.

Another moment's yielding to weariness, then Bonnie got up and followed arrows to accounting. She found no one there to challenge her access to the computer. She worked it, again in vain. As far as the Chemrem payroll was concerned, Vernon Gardner was an unperson.

Had she misheard her classmate at the class reunion? That was in another country, another world, another state of being. But that was her only lead, all she had to go on. She had to believe she remembered right.

She walked out onto the floor. The vast maze of the production line was almost entirely automated. She spotted just three workers among the rolling pills and marching bottles. Down among the capping and sealing machines she braced the first.

The sister popped her gum thoughtfully. "Vernon Gardner? Ain't that the name of the guy that's still alive? What would *he* be doing *here*? Hell no, I ain't seen him."

"I heard he worked here once—Before."

"Well, he don't work here now. Believe you me, I would've noticed him."

The second and third, though the second had attained to foreper-

son Before and was now plant supervisor, were no more able to play *de a ex machina*.

Bonnie dragged herself toward an exit. Dead end. Not quite: if there was an executive in the executive suite. . . . She turned back.

She encountered no guardian secretaries. Here too the plant ran itself. She opened doors, found dark offices . . . till she came to the last and highest.

Light edged the not-quite-to door of the president's office. The door gave silently to her touch. A kingsize chair showed its back and overflow bits of a dozing figure. Softly she stepped into the room. Carpeting muffled her footfalls but not her heartbeat.

She coughed.

The chair swiveled suddenly and swiftly unswallowed a cleaningperson who made to move a vacuum nozzle over the carpet. The cleaningperson looked so outlandishly and garishly female—bewigged, beplatform-soled, and beflounced in-between—that Bonnie first thought herself to be face-to-face with a Screwloose, one of those who had convinced themselves Checkmate never happened and the men were merely lying low. Then Bonnie saw through the guise.

Under the makeup and the getup it was Vernon Gardner.

He let fall the nozzle, then recovered himself.

"Hello, Bonnie." He spoke calmly and smiled, but his eyes kept shifting and his voice stayed hushed.

For a heartstopping moment she believed she had been dreadfully wrong about him.

He seemed to sense this and rushed, in a deeper tone, to set her straight.

"Don't let this outfit fool you. I have to dress in drag to stay alive. They'd tear me apart trying to get their hands on me. You wouldn't believe what I've been through." He looked her up and down. "You haven't changed."

"You have." It was true. Bonnie's awareness of what Vernon had done somehow vested creepy Vernon with a strange dignity despite the drag.

At the same time she horrified itself. What was wrong with her? Why was she making small talk? Where was her rage over Lyle's death? Where was her outrage at all the other deaths?

She had only to shout to the sisters in the plant, "Come quick! He's here!"

And then what?

No. She alone had to deal with him. She herself had to have it out with him.

But first there was something she wanted to find out. She felt almost shy asking.

"Why didn't you look me up?"

He gestured. "You remember how things were. The world was upside down. In all that turmoil I just didn't know how to get in touch. And then when things settled down and I started searching I got made as a man and snatched by a roaming bevy of ex-marines." His eyes grew dreamy. "I learned to play one against another. But I couldn't stand captivity. I let one think I was willing to slip away with her. Once I got free I made a run for it. And here I am. Till I can come out of the closet on my own terms I've made myself scarce." He listened to the inner echo of what he had just said. "That's a good one, isn't it? 'I made myself scarce.' In more ways than one I made myself scarce."

There. He had all but said it.

But she had to ask him outright.

"You did it? You caused Checkmate?"

He looked surprised. "Of course."

"You feel no guilt?"

He lifted high his head. "Why should I? Survival of the fittest. That's the name of the game, isn't it?"

"But your male friends, your male relatives."

"What friends?" He dismissed friends with a wave. "Tell you the truth, I hated my old man and my younger brother." Another wave. "But that's all bygone." His eyes lit up. "I guess you want to know how I did it. I was janitor Before in this very plant just so I could use the facilities. Every night for years I sneaked into the lab to perfect the virus. Of course, I made sure to immunize myself before I let it loose."

And he had done this monstrous, this fabulous thing, for her. Of all the sisters she was the one. The thought gave her a dizzy feeling. *I'd be happy only my mind keeps butting in. Mind, mind your own business.* The ghost of Lyle grew fainter. But was it fair for the murderer to enjoy the fruits of his crime? Still, evolution cared nothing for fairness. And done was done.

Guilt's shadow brushed her. Sisterhood. Who of her sisters would believe, want to believe, or care, that Vernon had done it for her? What mattered was that she knew the truth of it. Vernon had lavished on her the greatest flattery that ever a man had lavished on a woman. Poor second-best Cain had killed Abel not over a woman's favor but over God's. Her heart swelled. Blind to the drag, she looked at Vernon and in a flash her mind retrieved something from her

freshman chemistry. The greater the electronegativity difference between two atoms, the more polar the bond between them.

He was mad, of course, but gloriously mad. No, it was not all madness. Above all, it was love. If that was madness she was mad too.

"You did it all for me?" She wanted to hear him say it.

And he did. Readily. "Of course it's all because of you, Bonnie."

"Then take me."

Almost at once emptiness filled her.

Vernon gazed through her as though seeing all the world's lonely lovely women.

"Things have changed, Bonnie."

She stood stunned, her head in a roar.

Slowly he focused on her and gave her a half smile.

"Maybe if you were the last woman in the world. . . ."

After the shock of that passed, Bonnie looked thoughtful.

ANGER IN HEAVEN

(on hearing of the Nobel award for physics)

In her celestial rocking-chair,

electric charges stiffen her hair.

Her needles click like piston-rods

as Hanna-Hanna, grandmother of gods,

knits a new spiral universe.

Remembering bipeds she mutters a curse:

"Knit one, quark one, knit one, quark;

proton, meson, neutron, spark.

Impertinent creatures, arrogant blight,

dragging my mysteries out of the night;

moths in my clothing, gnats in my beer,

I shall humble your hubris, flog you with fear."

As her fabric expands with the speed of light,

mad stitches are dropped, black holes appear.

—Hope Athearn

THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

There aren't too many SF con(vention)s in the next couple of months, so now's a good time to start planning for social weekends with your favorite authors, editors, artists and fellow fans in the Spring. For a longer, later list and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. The hotline is (703) 273-6111. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number CLEARLY and I'll call back. When calling cons, give your name and reason for calling right away. When writing, enclose an SASE. Look for me as Filthy Pierre.

Darkover Grand Council Meeting. For info, write: Armida Council, Box 7501, Newark DE 19711. Or phone: (302) 368-9570 (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Wilmington DE (if location omitted, same as in address) on: 28-30 Nov., 1980. Guests will include: Katherine Kurtz, Marion Zimmer Bradley, C. J. Cherryh, Nancy Springer.

ChattaCon, Box 21173, Chattanooga TN 37421. (615) 892-5127. 16-18 Jan., 1981. Jack (Well of Souls) Chalker, Forrest J. (Famous Monsters) Ackerman, Gordon Dickson, B. Longyear.

LastCon, c/o Connell, 50 Dove, Albany NY 12210. (518) 434-8217. 23-25 Jan. Hal (Mission of Gravity) Clement, Jan Howard Finder. After two cons in Nov., 1979, Albany is back.

AquaCon, Box 815, Brea CA 92621. Anaheim (Disneyland) CA, 12-15 Feb. Philip Jose (Riverworld) Farmer, William Rotsler, Jan Bogstad & Jeanne Gomoll of JANUS. Masquerade.

CapriCon, Box 416, Zion IL 60099. Evanston IL 20-22 Feb. Terry Carr, editor of Universe.

Boskone, c/o NESFA, Box G, MIT PO, Boston MA 02139. 13-16 Feb. If they survived NorEasCon.

StellarCon, c/o Allen, Box 4-EUC, UNC-G, Greensboro NC 27412. 27 Feb.-1 Mar. Masquerade. Participation by the S. C. A., who live medievally (e.g., leaders chosen by combat).

WisCon, c/o SF3, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 233-0326. 6-8 Mar. The Coulsons.

FanCon, c/o The Alliance, Box 1865, Panama City FL 32401. 5-7 Mar.

CoastCon, Box 6025, Biloxi MS 39532. (601) 374-3046. 13-15 Mar. At the Royal D'Iberville.

UpperSouthClave, Box U122, College Heights Sta., Bowling Green KY 42101. 13-15 Mar.

MarCon, Box 2583, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 497-9953. 13-15 Mar. Andrew J. & Jodie Offutt, Bob & Ann Passovoy. This con is legendary among long-time fans. Intimate atmosphere.

LunaCon, Box 204, Brooklyn NY 11230. Hasbrouck Heights NJ (near New York), 20-22 Mar.

Satyricon, Box 323, Knoxville TN 37901. 3-5 Apr. Anne (White Dragon) McCaffrey, A. Offutt.

CineCon, c/o Sp. Age Books, 305 Swanston, Melbourne 3000 Vic, Australia. 663-1777. Easter.

DisClave, c/o Gilliland, 4030 8th St. S., Arlington VA 22204. (703) 920-6087. 22-24 May.

ConQuest, 4228 Greenwood Pl., Kansas City MO 64111. 22-24 May. Poul Anderson, Lee Killough.

Advention, Box 130, Marden SA 5070, Australia. Adelaide, Queen's Birthday weekend.

X-Con, c/o Inda, 1743 N. Cambridge #301, Milwaukee WI 53202. 12-14 Jun. L. S. & C. de Camp.

MidWestCon, 3953 St. Johns Terr., Cincinnati OH 45236. 26-28 Jun. Where old-timers meet.

WesterCon 34, Box 161719, Sacramento CA 95816. Held over the July 4th weekend in 1981.

August Party, Box 893, Silver Spring MD 20901. 7-9 Aug. The fannish Star Trek con returns.

Denvention II, Box 11545, Denver CO 80211. (313) 433-9774. 3-7 Sep., 1981. C. L. Moore, C. Simak, R. Hevelin, Ed Bryant. The 1981 World SF Con. Join before rates go up any more.

THE ADOPTED FATHER

by Gene Wolfe

art: Laura Buscemi



After graduation from the University of Houston—with the help of the GI Bill after the Korean War—the author married Rosemary Dietsch, a girl he had met when they were both four. He started writing in 1956, the year they were married, in the hope of earning enough money for furniture. In 1973, his novella "The Death of Dr. Island" won a Nebula. His best known book (so far) is probably The Fifth Head of Cerebus. The Wolfes now live near Chicago with their four children: Roy Emerson II, Madeleine, Therese Georgeanne, and Matthew Dietsch.

John Parker's hands gripped the edge of the counter. "Do you mean," he said, "that although I paid for the deliveries, I can't see the records?"

"I mean," the nurse in the screen answered carefully, "that there are no more records, Mr. Parker. We have already given you copies of all those we have. Our records show the names, dates, and times of birth of your three children, their medical history here, and the medical history of Ms. Roberts. That is all we have."

"There must be more," John Parker said. To either side of him, women stood arguing with similar nurses in similar screens.

"There is no more, Mr. Parker. You have seen what we have. Ms. Roberts has been here three times. Your children were named—by her—Robert, Marian, and Tina. There were no complications. Ms. Roberts's confinements were paid for by the North American Division of World Assurance—not by you, as you appear to believe."

"You must fingerprint them," John Parker said. "For the police, if for no other reason. Or footprints. Don't you take footprints?"

"No, Mr. Parker," the nurse said. "That hasn't been done for many years. At birth the infant remains with its mother until its wrist has been banded. The band cannot be removed. There is no possibility of an exchange."

"Is there some way I can talk to a human being?" John Parker asked.

The nurse in the screen shook her head. "Not in my hospital, Mr. Parker. Not in any modern hospital."

Although he would have liked it very much if there had been, there was nothing modern about the foyer of John Parker's building. There was nothing old about it either, no suggestion of more gracious days. It was contemporary, in a period when *contemporary* meant the cheapest possible construction that would do the job, a period when a hundred million people drew unemployment benefits and the cost of labor was (John Parker smiled bitterly to himself) astronomical. Snow had been tracked onto the floor of this foyer, and a pouch of orange drink had been spilled in the elevator. John Parker pressed the button for the seventy-fifth floor, wondering why he did so.

A few days before, the elevator had stopped on the sixty-seventh, no doubt because some child had pushed UP, then dashed back into his own apartment. John Parker had not noticed. He had left the elevator and walked down a corridor precisely like his own. He had knocked on the door that should have been his, before he had seen

the obscenity painted on it. Obscenities were no novelty; but this one had been old, the day-glow magenta paint flaking, and not his. He had walked back down the corridor to the elevator then and seen that he had gotten off at sixty-seven, eight floors too low.

Possibly it was my apartment after all, John Parker thought. I have done what the sign said.

The soles of his shoes were slightly sticky as he walked the corridor today. Now he read the graffiti, something he had not done for years. Yes, this was the seventy-fifth floor, to which a few new injunctions had been added. He searched it with his eyes—someone was assaulted in the building every month or so. He knocked at his own door, liberally besprinkled with short words, though most of the boys in this part of the building were supposed to be afraid of Robert.

"Yes?"

"Me. John." It was what he always said. He listened to Roseanne unfasten the chain and turn the bolt, then stepped into the warmth—struck again, as he had been every day for the past week, by how little Roseanne resembled him. Or, he thought, as he stared at his reflection in the window later, how little he resembled her. Weren't couples supposed to come to look alike? He and Roseanne had been together for nearly twenty years now.

Yet that was all right. Roseanne was no blood of his, not his sister, not his cousin. The children resembled neither of them, and that was not all right—not quite. Robert was tall and fair. Tina was fair, and would be tall. Both had blue eyes; his own were brown, Roseanne's hazel. Marian was small and dark, much smaller than he—smaller, for that matter, than his mother or his sisters. Her eyes were brown, but darker than his own; her hair nearly black.

An accident of the genes? Quite possibly, and it did not really matter. But none of them thought the way he did, they all thought he was eccentric or worse, and that mattered a great deal. He got out a sheet of paper and squared it on his board, using the inexpensive little drafting machine his scholarship had supplied him with when he had entered the university. It had had to be repaired many times since then; but now, when he had long since lost sight of every human friend he had made there, it still functioned. He thought, this is the big day. This is the day I'm going to do the park.

"Another park?" Roseanne asked.

John Parker nodded, not looking up.

She leaned over his board as she always did, her hair just brushing his cheek. "That's a lovely one. What are these?"

"Habitats. It has a small zoo. African veldt here, pampas there. Andes over here. Refreshment complex—I'd like to have a real restaurant, but you can't put that in a drawing, and you know they'd never do it. Rest rooms. Security station. Petting zoo for the children."

"Maybe if you sent some of your plans to the mayor, he'd build them."

"You have sent him some," John Parker reminded her.

"I have, but you haven't." It was necessary to Roseanne's peace of mind that she believe him vaguely important.

"Perhaps someday I will," John Parker said.

"He was on TV just now. He looked very nice—you should have seen him. He asked everyone to cooperate with the police and refrain from vandalizing city property."

"I'm not a vandal," John Parker said.

Robert came in to borrow money. "Where's this one?" he asked. "On the moon?"

"Mars," John Parker said. "It would be perfectly possible to make Mars a world much like Earth. A cloud of finely powdered aluminum behind it would reflect back enough heat to raise the night temperature. Bringing down Deimos and Phobos and a little of the asteroid belt would increase the planet's mass enough to let it hold an atmosphere, which you could make by breaking down the stony matter in the asteroids and moons. Pretty soon you'd turn the red planet green."

"What's this?"

"A hedge maze for children and lovers. There are seats, you see, and bowers. Sculpture the kids can climb on. They can wade in the pond too, and go up the tower in the middle to watch the people trying to find their way out. That's the goal."

"I bet I can solve it," Robert said. He put his finger on the drawing to trace the paths, but soon gave up.

John Parker had expected a screen and a computer persona at the agency. He was surprised and pleased to be ushered into the presence of a human being, a gray-haired woman who did not even look particularly motherly. "I'm here to inquire about adoption," John Parker said carefully.

"Certainly." The woman paused. "I take it you are—how should I put it?—one half of a couple?"

John Parker shook his head.

Her hand went toward a button on her desk. "Perhaps we should have one of the legal staff present."

He covered the button with his own hand and smiled. "That won't be necessary. Really it won't, Ms.—?"

"Harris. You needn't be married, you understand, Mr. Parker."

John Parker nodded.

"And of course the other member of the couple can be of your own gender—we don't inquire. But there must be two persons willing to make a home, willing to take responsibility for the welfare of the child."

"I don't want to adopt a child. I want to be adopted myself."

Ms. Harris stared at him.

"I'm not being facetious. I want a group of children to take me as their father. I'm over forty, I have a good job and no criminal record."

"You want them to adopt you," Ms. Harris said.

John Parker nodded. "Is that ever done?"

Ms. Harris shook her head slowly. "I don't think so. I've never heard of it. I'll bring it up at the next board meeting. It might be a good idea."

"So much can be done with our minds now," John Parker said. "Implanted learning and so on. It should be possible to erase whole areas of experience. After it was over, the man could forget it wasn't his own family." He leaned forward. "Honestly, Ms. Harris, didn't they think of that long ago?"

Too quickly to be stopped, Ms. Harris's hand stabbed one of the buttons. John Parker rose, got his overcoat, and walked out. No one attempted to stop him.

He got off at the sixty-seventh floor and went down the corridor counting doors. The old obscenity had been partially obscured by a new purple one. He knocked on it.

There was no answer.

He knocked again, louder. There was still no reply, and he thumped the door with his fist, and at last began to kick it. At the thirteenth or possibly the fifteenth kick, wood shattered and it flew open.

The strange living room was cool. Not as cold as the corridor outside, but not nearly as warm as his own. It had been an ordinary enough living room once, perhaps—two chairs, a sofa, the television, an end table. Yet it appeared (John Parker smiled to himself) that now someone was actually living in it. There was an untidy knot of blankets at one end of the sofa, a half-full glass of water on the

end table, crumpled foil packages on the floor. He thought, If only I were enough of a detective, I could tell how long it's been since anyone was here—but there are no detectives now, only police. . . .

The back of the television felt slightly warm, but he might have been wrong.

In the kitchen, the sink was filled with dirty plates and gummy cups and glasses. A full canister of synthetic coffee and three unopened packages of irradiated food lay in one of the cabinets; they were *Ham and Lima Beans*, *Liver and Onions*, and *Smoked Tongue with Au Gratin Potatoes*. "A kid," John Parker said under his breath. He went into the living room again. "Come on out. I know you're in here." He did not, not really.

There was only one bedroom, and he wondered why the child did not sleep in it. When he opened the door, it was like opening the door of the foyer. Worse. A blast of icy wind hit him. He stepped inside, leaving the door open so he could keep an eye on the one to the corridor.

A dead woman lay in the bed. Her face was uncovered, her eyes open. John Parker pulled down the sheet. She wore only a nightgown; there was no blood, and there were no marks on her neck. He tossed an empty pill bottle into a dresser drawer and slid it closed, then pulled the sheet over her face, obscurely glad he had not had to touch her.

In the living room again, he shut the bedroom door behind him. The bathroom was locked; he told himself he should have thought of the bathroom to begin with. "Come out," he said. "It's no use. I'll just break the lock." He turned on the television and sat down on the sofa.

Twenty minutes passed before he heard the rattle of the knob. Without turning his head he said, "Come on out. I won't hurt you, and I might be able to help you. You're almost out of groceries."

It was a boy, small and dark as Marian. "How'd you know?" he said.

"That you were in here? Somebody was. The nightbolt was out in your front door—I could see it through the crack, and it has to be turned from inside. A grown-up would have answered when I knocked, or at least yelled for help when I kicked the door. Then too, I looked at what you ate. There'd been soft drinks, but they were all gone and you were drinking water. You never made coffee, and the meals you've got left are the kind my own kids—" John Parker stopped, unable to finish the sentence. "I suppose I'm lucky I wasn't arrested. I don't know what made me come here, except

that I'd been here once before. For some reason I thought I'd find something out here. You try to go back . . ."

"What are you going to do, Mister?"

"I don't know," John Parker said slowly.

"Ain't you a blue?"

John Parker shook his head. "I'm an architect. Why didn't you go to the police, or somebody, instead of just staying here and playing games with the elevators? If you'd told your teacher at school, it would have called some social agency."

"They would have taken me away from here," the boy said. "I didn't want to go."

"So you just opened the window and closed off the bedroom. How long ago?"

"I don't know."

The boy began to cry; the sobs shook him like convulsions, and for the first time John Parker realized how young he was. He picked him up. The room was still cold, and he opened his overcoat, wrapping it about them both. "Less than three weeks anyway. It hasn't been this cold for longer than that. What's your name?"

"Mitch." More sobs. "Why'd mama die?"

"Heart attack, probably. Bad food, bad air. People die young, Mitch, but she's gone and that's the thing to remember, and whatever it was that hurt her can't hurt her anymore. Did you ever play some game when you knew the other kid was going to beat you?"

Interested, Mitch looked up and nodded.

"Then remember how when he *does* beat you, the game is over and you can go away. Dying's like that. Your mother's gone away, and she's finished with whatever it was."

"Do you know my father?"

"Perhaps," John Parker said. "Who is your father?"

"I don't know his name. He lives here in this building."

"Do you think it could be me?"

Mitch shook his head. "I don't think so. Mama showed him to me once."

"And that's why you stayed. You've been trying to find him."

"Do you know who he is?"

"No," John Parker said. "But I know what he is. Do you know that, Mitch?"

"No," the boy said softly.

John Parker set him down and began to pace the room. "He's someone like you. That's what makes him your father. Take my own children. If I have any, they'll be more or less like me—in logic,

that's called a tautology. If you're crazy, your kids are crazy too, and crazy in more or less the same way you are. That's what makes them your kids." His foot sent a yellow envelope skittering across the floor. He retrieved it and tore it open: **This is your FINAL warning. If we do not receive . . .** "They're going to throw you out of here," John Parker said. "How long ago did this come?"

"I don't know."

"Today?"

Mitch shook his head.

"Yesterday?"

"Maybe." Mitch shrugged.

"There are probably two or three more in the series after this, but there may not be too, and anyway it's possible you've already got them. Did your mother keep any writing paper?"

Mitch went into the little kitchen and brought a stack of cheap, white stationery from a drawer. "We only need one envelope," John Parker said. He wrote the Housing Authority's address on it and added a stamp from the supply he carried in his check folder, then dropped the bill in.

"Are you going to pay?"

"Your mother must have been at least four months behind," John Parker said, "and I can't afford to. But this will buy us some time." He tore out a check and crossed off his own name and Roseanne's, then drew a line through the account number and wrote in a fictitious one. He made the check out for the amount specified on the bill, and signed it **Robert Roberts-Parker**, explaining, "The bank's computer will read my account number anyway—it's printed in magnetic ink. When I send the check back, they'll credit my account and go looking for Robert, who'll be hard to find since he doesn't have an account and isn't in the telephone directory. With any luck, they'll spend a while on the number I gave them too."

Mitch stared at him without comprehension.

"Eventually they'll disallow the check and send you more letters. Something may have turned up by then. If it hasn't, we'll have to think up another game." John Parker thrust the check into the envelope and licked the flap. "It's a great principle—you could call it the principle of adventure or even the principle of play. Robert—that's the young man who just paid your rent—tried to solve my maze and couldn't, even after I told him that the tower was for the kids to climb, and the pond was for them to wade in. You have to wade across the pond to reach the tower, of course. He saw a barrier when he should have seen an invitation. I'll show you

that maze sometime. You like to play, Mitch?"

The boy nodded.

"Me too." John Parker crossed to the window and stared at the dark sky beyond the glass. "That's coal smoke, the technology of the nineteenth century brought into the twenty-first and hard at work. They could have conquered the solar system and harnessed the sun, but they did this instead, because there was no fun involved. Their great grandfathers had done it, and they knew it would work. *Tom Swift and His Steam Everything*. I've got most of the Tom Swift books, Mitch; and I'll let you read them when you're a little older. Coal makes great buttons for snowmen, though."

"Are we going to look for my father now?"

"As soon as I fix your lock," John Parker said. He found epoxy in the kitchen and recreated the wood around the shattered socket. "That'll set in three or four hours," he told the boy. "If no one pushes on your door before then, this place will be all right. Tonight we'll do something about your mama, put her where the right people will find her and take care of her."

In the elevator, he grasped the boy's shoulder. "You know what we've been doing wrong, Mitch? We've been looking seriously—me for my own kids, you for your dad. Looking seriously only finds little things, and those aren't little things. We have to have fun. Then maybe we'll both find what we want. I know a place that has a heated pool. Let's go swimming."

The elevator jolted to a stop. Three young men were waiting in the foyer. One held a tire iron, one a doubled length of chain. John Parker thrust a hand into his coat pocket. "This fires high energy gamma rays," he said levelly. "You don't feel a thing now, but within six weeks you'll develop leukemia and in six more you'll be dead."

The three hesitated, and he flipped open a match box with his other hand. "I'm calling in Star Patrol to pick up the pieces," he announced.

When they were safely outside, John Parker told Mitch, "See, you just learned something—be crazy. Nobody bothers the crazy people." He paused. "In the end, maybe it's the crazy people who win after all. Is swimming okay? You like to swim?"

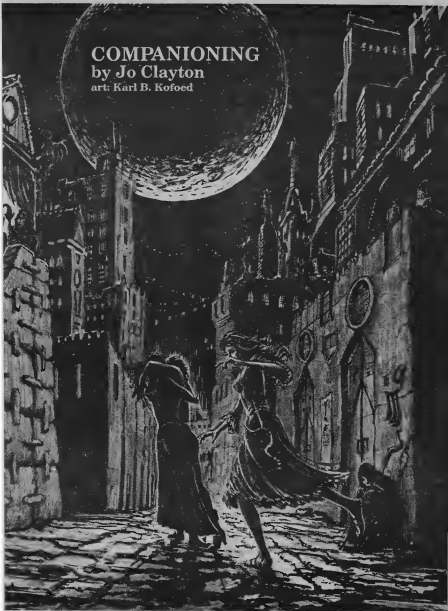
Mitch nodded, his eyes shining.

John Parker raised the match box to his lips. "We're in trouble down here," he whispered, "but don't beam us up quite yet." The hand that a moment before had been a radiation pistol was hailing a cab.



COMPANIONING

by Jo Clayton
art: Karl B. Kofoed



The author reports that she is now subsisting—or attempting to do so—on writing alone, having parted company with her teaching job. She's currently working on the sixth volume in her "Diadem" series (DAW Books), and the second volume in a fantasy trilogy, tucking in short stories, such as the one that follows, whenever she has time to breathe.

"Damn him. Five days and not a word." Gleia stabbed the needle through the soft black material, pricked her finger, and jerked it away before blood could stain the cloth. Sucking at the small wound, she laid the shawl aside and swung around on the window seat where she'd taken her work to save on lamp oil, using instead the pale red light from Horli that struggled through the heavy layer of clouds. She propped her elbows on the window sill and gazed out at the busy street below. The pattern of silver and green on the shawl heaped beside her was nearly finished. Another day and there'd be coins plumping out the limp money pouch she'd left on the table by the bed. *One more thing to worry about. That and Shounach. Damn him for not letting me know whether he's alive or dead.*

She was still chuckling at that absurdity when an iron bird swooped past to hover over the street. As she watched, it darted back and forth over the suddenly quiet people, then soared back to hover in front of her, humming like an outsize insect, wings a foot long moving slightly but constantly, the red light from cloud-hidden Horli sliding along crisply modeled feathers. The ball-head's single eye set above a needle beak scanned her, small flickers of red light stirring in the depths of the dark lens. The thing made her shiver—a parody of a living bird. Deel called it an iron bird, the Lossal's iron bird, though it was made of a shining metal more like polished silver than iron. *It's only a machine*, she told herself, *not a creation of some devil sorcery*. As it swung suddenly and whirred off, she shivered again. *Temokeuu-my-sea-father, I wish you were here to tell me it's only a machine*. She continued to watch as it soared inward over the middle city, dipping finally out of the sight behind one of the Family Houses that dominated the center of walled Istir.

She rested her chin on her hands and looked dreamily out the window, thinking of her adopted family of sea-folk, wondering how

Tetaki-her-brother was coming with his new trade route, wondering whether Jevati-her-friend had married again. Snatches of music from neighboring taverns drifted up to her; street sounds floated around her—men's voices as they passed along the street, arguing, talking, laughing; the clop-clop of horses' hooves on the dank stone paving, a whinny or two and some snorts; the distant blended noise of huckster cries coming from the markets on both sides of the Stranger's Quarter. Sharp smells floated on the lazy breeze—frying oil, fish, cooked meats, urine, horse manure. Her eyes dropped; she studied the people passing by, feeling a comfortable familiarity with a mix much like that she'd grown up with in Carhenas across the ocean: drylanders in silent groups; hunters; hillmen; boatmen from the highland rivers; an enigmatic group of veiled and armored women who seemed to call out hostility in the men around them. Gleia blinked, frowned as they passed out of sight followed by curses, uneasy laughter, obscene gestures.

Once the women were gone, Gleia lost interest in the street and turned back to wondering about Shounach. *How is he?* she thought. *What's he doing now? What's he been doing the last five days? Why doesn't he send word?* She scratched at her arm; living with the Juggler was making her itchy. *Companion*, she thought. *That red-haired bitch, the Lossal's daughter. . .* She flexed her fingers, then began rubbing at the line of her jaw. It was difficult . . . she wasn't used to fitting her actions to someone else's needs. *If he isn't back by tomorrow, she thought, I'm getting out of here.* With a feeling of relief, she let her hand drop into her lap. Relief and anger and uncertainty.

Relief because she was going back to the comfortable simplicity of living alone; she could feel her taut muscles relaxing.

Anger because she hurt at the thought of leaving him. She didn't want to allow him that much importance in her life. With an involuntary smile she remembered the long, lazy nights on the smuggler's ship that had brought them across the ocean from Thrakesh to this new land—new for her if not for Shounach. Remembered the painful, clumsy beginning of intimacy. Remembered his patience and skill—a skill she teased him about later when she'd regained some of her assurance—as he taught her body to respond. She clenched her hands into fists and beat on her thighs. *The Lossal's daughter. He's with her. Five days, five damn days. . .* The thought was fire in her blood. She pushed at the pain, trying to deny it, and sat for some minutes, the heels of her hands pressed against aching eyes. As her breathing steadied, the anger altered to uncertainty.

Uncertainty because she wanted to stay as much as she wanted to go. Because she had no place to go to if she left. Rubbing absently at the brands on her face, she leaned her head against the end of the shutter and wondered what she was going to do.

A rippling laugh from the street pulled her from her painful musing. She caught hold of the sill and leaned farther out.

A cloaked figure was slapping at the hands of a Harrier, one of the mercenaries hired by the six Families to act as guards and as a small private army if necessary. The long slim arm, the fluid movement looked familiar. The woman laughed again, called back a last cutting comment to the Harrier as she moved along the street with a free, flowing swagger that sent the ends of her cloak flying. Gleia smiled with pleasure, leaned down and waved. "Deel!"

The dancer looked up, pushed the hood back off her head. Raising her voice over the noise of the street, she called, "He come back yet?"

"Not yet." Gleia coughed to clear her throat then yelled, "Going somewhere?"

"Work." Deel wrinkled her nose, twisted her mobile face into a comical grimace. "New bunch of boatmen in from upriver. One-eye sent word I was to get there in half a breath." She shrugged. "Good money, but I hate those sorry slobbering bastards. Have lunch with me tomorrow?"

"I'd like that. Meet here?"

The dancer nodded. Gleia watched her swing off until she was out of sight, then pulled her head in and slid off the window seat. Making sure the needle was tucked securely into the material, she folded the shawl neatly and set it on the table by the bed, smiling as she remembered her meeting with Deel. *Five days ago I didn't know her and now I have a friend.*

In the Square of the Cloth Merchants, Shounach stood on a platform he'd rented, the blue glass balls circling his white-painted face, changing in number and shape as he turned slowly to face the crowd of traders and sellers, shoppers, market women, other entertainers, scattered Harriers, and a number of pickpockets and other thieves that pressed about the four sides of the platform. Gleia sat on the coping of the market well, watching what she could see of Shounach past the heads of the onlookers. A constant stream of people moved past her, edging along the fringes of the crowd, going on to stop at one or another of the small open-faced shops that lined the square.

As Shounach's routine neared its close, she felt a brief tugging at

her cafta, heard an angry yell, then a boy's shrill, rapid protest. She looked around. A Harrier had a small boy by the nape of his neck. Behind him a tall woman muffled in a long cloak stopped to watch, stiff with disapproval as she saw the Harrier drag the boy back to Gleia.

"Had his hand in your pocket." He scowled at the boy. "Fork over, Schlop."

"I din' do nothin'," the boy shrilled. He wriggled, trying to pull away from the Harrier's cruel grip. "I din' do nothin'."

Eyes on the child's tear-streaked face, Gleia thrust her hand into her pocket. Her handkerchief was gone, nothing more. She smiled up at the glowering man. "You're mistaken, despois. The boy took nothing. Let him go."

The Harrier grunted, hesitated a moment, then loosed his grip on the boy's skinny neck. He watched the child dart away, then stalked off, muttering about fool women.

"You might want this back."

Startled, Gleia looked over her shoulder. The woman who'd been watching was smiling at her, holding out her handkerchief.

"It's a beautiful thing; whoever gave it to you must think a lot of you." The woman smoothed out the square of katani with its wide band of white-on-white embroidery, her fingers lingering over the exquisite stitching.

With a laugh Gleia waved the handkerchief away. "If it pleases you, then keep it. It's no gift, merely my own work and my own design."

"I couldn't." The woman's dark amber eyes glowed as she touched the delicate pattern.

"Please do. I have others."

Smiling with pleasure, the woman tucked the handkerchief into her cloak pocket and settled beside Gleia on the well coping. "Why did you let the boy go?"

She was a tall woman with high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes, a wide mobile mouth that flashed easily from smiles to frowns. Her skin was a silky red-brown that looked poreless and fitted smoothly over long, elegant bones. Her hair was a disciplined foam of tiny curls only slightly darker than her skin. Underneath the dark cloak she wore wide amber silk strips arranged to flow around long slim legs. "My name's Deel. I dance at the Horn of Sandar in the Stranger's Quarter. You're new in Istir, aren't you. Why did you let the boy go?"

"I grew up in the streets myself." Gleia touched the scars on her

cheek, and met amber eyes bright with interest and understanding. "Not here. You're right about my being new." She flipped a hand at Shounach. "I came with the Juggler; we've only been here a few days." Reaching out, she touched Deel's hand. "My name's Gleia."

"I've been watching him the past few days. He's damn good, your Juggler." They sat in friendly silence as the Juggler began putting away his paraphernalia.

A litter carried by four brawny men eased into the square and moved through the scattering crowd toward the platform. The litter was gilded and profusely carved, its occupant hidden behind pale blue curtains.

Gleia frowned. "Who's that?"

Deel wrinkled her nose. "Toreykyn, the Lossal's daughter; that's the Lossal's sigil stitched on those curtains." She looked up, pointed. "Yeah, has to be her in there. The Lossal's iron birds are keeping an eye on her."

Two glittering metal bird-shapes were circling over the square. Gleia squinted up at them, trying to see them more clearly. "Iron birds?"

"Lossal's spies." Deel's mouth twisted, turned down at the corners. She tapped her polished nails lightly on her silk-covered thighs. "You've lost your man for a few days. Until she gets tired of him."

Gleia hid a smile as she watched the litter stop in front of Shounach. The Fox's luck has turned, she thought, remembering his frustration as he paced the room, cursing the insularity of Families that shut the Lossal away from him. Now he was riding in with the Lossal's daughter. She looked down. Her hands were closed into fists, fingernails cutting into her palms. After forcing her hands open, she glanced at Deel, and said with outward calm, "We do what we have to. No point in staying here any longer. Going back to the Quarter? Come have a glass of wine with me."

Shounach snapped the lid off the solvent and poured some on a rag. Kneeling beside his bag, he wiped the paint from his face, then began on his hands. His eyes moved restlessly over the scattering crowd; he was impatient with this waiting time, wanted to get on with his search for the source of the Ranga Eyes. He saw Gleia talking to a strange woman, felt a touch of irritation; she hadn't bothered to watch the performance. He scrubbed at his hands, annoyed at the way the white paint clung around his fingernails, jabbed the rag at the stubborn paint in the creases. At the same time he fought against the rising waves of rancor that threatened to explode into shapeless,

unreasonable anger spilling over anyone or anything around him. It never ends, he thought. He looked down at his hands, flexed the fingers, then put the solvent and the rag back in the bag.

He saw the litter approaching and remained on his knees waiting to see where it was going, holding his face calm as excitement rose within him when he recognized the Lossal's arms on the curtains.

The litter stopped in front of him; a slim, bangle-laden arm came through the curtains. With a flurry of clanks and tinkles, a delicate hand weighed down with many rings pulled the curtain back, retreated. Inside, the woman smiled up at him; she was stretched out, leaning on one elbow, pale-blue cushions piled around her; the hand that had drawn the curtain back now played with long strands of red-gold hair flowing over large, firm breasts which thrust against the silver-shot white avrishum of her long, loose dress.

Red hair. His eyes fastened on the bright waves for an instant. He shivered, forced a smile as he bowed his head and waited for her to speak.

The big, brown eyes focused on him began to blink nervously, the hand caressing the hair stiffened. The soft smiling mouth moved into a pout. "Juggler!" Her voice was sharp, petulant. He got the feeling she'd expected more response from him than a polite bow. He widened his smile and let his eyes travel slowly over her, appreciating the slim curves scarcely concealed by the soft, clinging material.

"Juggler." She was smiling again, her voice soft and caressing. "The Lothal wanth you to perform." Her long lashes fell, then lifted, as she lisped the words, the command in them smothered in sugar. "I'm moht interethed in your performanth, Juggler," she murmured. Her plump little hand closed tightly around cloth and hair. "Come with me now, Juggler, to my father." She stretched out her hand, more as a token of intent than as an offer of touching.

Shounach smiled, jumped easily down from the platform, his jacket swinging opening to show the flat, hard muscles of his chest. He slipped the strap of the bag over his shoulder, slapped it into place against his side, then walked the two steps to the woman's side. "My pleasure, Lady," he said quietly. He reached out and almost touched her hand, letting his hand hover over hers for a moment as he smiled into the dark brown eyes. Her red hair fluttered gently as the litter moved toward the gate to the market. She lisped banal and impertinent questions, her eyes moving over him with the possessive expression of a herdsman assessing a prize bull. At the gate he looked up and saw Gleia watching him, an odd expres-

sion on her face, a gentle vulnerable look as fleeting as a moment's thought. She turned and moved away with the tall, dark woman beside her. He glanced back a moment later, saw the cluster of soft brown curls held high, saw a brief arc of cheek as Gleia turned to talk to the strange woman. A sharp note in the Lossal's daughter's voice brought his attention back to her. He listened to her question, then answered her as they walked along the broad avenue leading to the Families' quarter, walled in, apart from the rest of the city.

Gleia picked up the pouch, poured the coins into her hand, frowning as she counted the diminishing supply. With a sigh she dumped the coins back in the pouch, jerked the drawstring tight, and slipped the loop over her head, dropping the pouch inside her cafta to dangle between her breasts. She brushed off the bottoms of her feet, slid them into sandals, ran a comb through her tangled curls, went out. She grimaced with disgust as she locked the door and slipped the key into her pocket; given thirty seconds and a bit of bent wire she'd be inside with no trouble at all. *Good thing there isn't much to steal.*

Outside, she looked up, shading her eyes with one hand. The sky was clear, with blue Hesh edging past fuzzy red Horli. She pulled the hood of her cafta up over her head. The respite was over. With Hesh emerging from behind Horli she'd have to watch her exposure. The blue sun was a killer. She stepped back and stood waiting as clusters of men moved past, some strolling, others walking briskly.

"Gleia, thanks for waiting." Deel came rushing up, her cloak fluttering about her long legs. "Merd had some time off this morning and I couldn't get away earlier."

Gleia turned, began walking along beside her, threading through the thickening crowd as late sleepers joined those already moving, blending into the same mix as before, even to the compact group of veiled women. Gleia nodded at them. "You know who or what they are?"

Deel followed the nod and saw the women. She shivered. "Never mind them." She sounded uncomfortable.

"Why?" Gleia caught hold of Deel's arm. "Who are they?"

"They call themselves trail women," Deel said reluctantly. "Come from somewhere upriver like the boatmen. Men say they're witches, unnatural creatures; they live together, won't let men in their compounds; lot of funny stories about them and when I say funny I don't mean ha-ha."

With Gleia silent, thinking over what she'd just heard, and Deel too disturbed to talk, the two women wound through the streets

toward the row of cook shops in the shadow of the outside wall.

After buying meat pies and mugs of cha, Gleia and Deel moved outside and sat down on a shadowed bench in a quiet corner where the massive outer wall turned to follow the line of the river. Deel finished the meat pie quickly, lifted the cheap clay mug to her lips, her amber eyes sweeping over Gleia. "Still no sign?"

"No." Gleia sipped at her cha, then settled back, pushing the hood off her head with a sigh of pleasure.

Deel chuckled, unfastened the clip holding her cloak around her shoulders and let it fall away. She shook the springy, foaming curls haloing her head, pushed straying tendrils off her face. "He must be something special, your man." She raised an eyebrow. "Most of Toreykyn's fancies don't last half this long." Her mouth turned down again. "If she gets too taken with him, the Lossal will open the eyes he keeps shut. Then, good-bye Juggler."

Gleia folded both hands about the coarse clay of her cup, sipped at the cooling cha. She could feel the clay clicking dully against her teeth. Her hands were shaking. The cha burned down her throat. After a moment she rested the cup on her thigh, feeling the spot of warmth through the material of her cafta. "What choice do people like us have? We do what we must to stay alive."

Deel leaned back, her amber eyes narrowed, her long legs like polished wood coming through the slits in her costume. "Istir's no place for a woman on her own. You should look around, find yourself a protector." She grinned at Gleia's grimace. "No need to make faces, girl; it's the truth and you know it."

Gleia's mouth twitched. She rubbed her thumb under her lower lip, then stroked the scars on her cheek. "No," she said quietly. "Deel, I've been on my own since I was born. I wouldn't know how to act with a protector." She took a long swallow of cha, lowered the mug back to her thigh. "And I don't want to learn."

"What about the Juggler?"

"That's different."

Deel snorted. "It always is."

Gleia scowled stubbornly. "You don't know." She examined Deel's face over the edge of the mug as she lifted it to her lips. "What happened to your eye?"

Deel grimaced. "Merd. His captain's been riding him hard the past few days so he takes it out on me."

"And you want me to find a protector. No thanks, friend."

Deel spread out long slender arms, her narrow hands turning in quick flashing gestures. "Lot worse than Merd around. Me being a

dancer, I get lots of hassles. Some of the bosses're worse than the drunks hanging around the bar when I dance. Since I've been with Merd, both types leave me alone. He got physical with hecklers and clods hard-timing me." She chuckled. "He's half as big as a house and a Harrier besides. No one wants to get the Families stirred up. It's worth a few lumps. Anyway, he's not so bad." She shrugged, stroked her finger along the clean-cut curve of her upper lip. "You wouldn't be bad looking if you covered up those scars. Why don't you let me give you some stuff I have? I'll show you how to fix yourself up."

Gleia grinned at Deel. "I don't give a damn about trying to change myself, friend. I know how I look. I like the way I look."

"Dumb." Deel leaned forward, spread her hands out in front of Gleia. They were meticulously manicured, the nails polished a dark plum that matched the gloss she wore on her lips. "Put your hands by mine."

Gleia spread her smaller hands beside the dancer's. Short fingers, short nails, the tip of her middle finger and the side of one thumb rough as sandstone from repeated needle pricks.

Deel clucked with distress. "Didn't anyone ever show you how to take care of yourself?" She lifted one of Gleia's hands and turned it over, scowling at the dry skin of the palm. "You got any money left?"

"A little." Gleia gently freed her hand. "I've almost finished embroidering a shawl. A couple hours' work left on it. I could use some help finding a reasonably honest merchant to buy it."

"Got it, hon." Deel frowned, tapping the tips of her fingernails lightly on the amber silk covering her thighs. "I'll see if I can get hold of Merd. With him along, no merchant's going to cheat you more than reasonable. If your man's not back by tomorrow morning we can grab a bite to eat and hunt out a couple men I know of. What're you going to do once you've got the money?"

Gleia was silent a long moment. Finally she smoothed her hand across her eyes. "I don't know," she said slowly. "Last night I thought I'd leave. Now . . . I don't know. I . . ." She stopped talking, shook her head, sat frowning at the dregs of cha in the mug. "Deel, what's happening here in Istir? What's got people so stirred up?"

The amber eyes studied her, then the dancer nodded. "Right. You and your Juggler picked a bad time to come here." Deel crossed her arms over her breasts and leaned forward until her head was close to Gleia's. "The Stareyn's getting feeble, so I hear. They don't let it out, the Families, I mean, but a lot of people work in the Kiralydom

and go home to their families when their hours are done. So people know more than the Families think. And Merd has duty in the Kiralydom twice a week. He tells me the Stareyn drools and goes to sleep in the middle of what he's saying. He's a Sokklaun, the Stareyn, I mean. The Sokkla have held the Stareynate for the past three Stareyns which means they've ruled Istir and the Istraven for years and years. But the Lossalni are prowling around ready to take it from them soon's they figure out how." She looked cautiously around, then leaned closer and whispered, "Rumor is they have. The Stareyn's Lot is supposed to be tamperproof, pure chance, but men keep saying the Lossal's found a way to change the odds. Me . . ." She glanced about again, but none of the men moving past seemed interested in them. "Me, I'm thinking hard of getting out of here, maybe going south to Zindaira. I've got family there. And I'm a damn good dancer. I won't starve. Why don't you come with me? You said you were thinking of leaving. Two women would be safer than one."

"What about Merd?"

"I'll miss the big idiot, but I'd miss my head a lot more. If the Stareyn goes, he'll be on duty till he drops. What I see, there's going to be a lot of trouble. When powerful families fight, the little people get smashed flat. Like you said, you can feel the tension even here in the Stranger's Quarter. Any day now the mess starts. One of the reasons Merd's captain is so edgy." She giggled. "One of the reasons I got this eye." She looked up. Clouds were beginning to thicken over the suns. "Damn. It's going to be a wet night. On top of everything else that means the Horn is going to be wall-to-wall boatmen." She hitched her cloak back around her, fastened the chain and pin. "Think about what I said, Gleia. The Juggler's got himself in a real sticky spot. The Lossal, that little viper, would poison half the city to protect his daughter. He'll never admit even to himself that she sleeps around worse than a whore. Six days now." She shook her head. "Don't think you'll see him again, Gleia." Sighing she stood and pulled up the hood of her cloak. "I've got to go. Merd's coming back later this afternoon and he expects me to be home. Think over what I said. If you want to leave, come with me."

Gleia watched her swing off, then looked down at the skim of cha left in the mug. With a sharp cry of pain and frustration, she tightened her fingers about the mug then flung it against the wall where it crashed into crumbly shards that pattered softly on the stone pavement seconds later. She dropped her head into her hands, her dilemma intensified by Deel's offer. "Shounach, Shounach," she

whispered. "What should I do? If I knew what was happening to you. If I knew . . . knew why me . . . why you try so hard with me . . . if I knew . . . if I knew what I . . . Ranga Eyes . . ." She lifted her head and stared down at cupped hands, remembering the whispering temptations of the egg-shaped crystal she'd found in the streets of Carhenas; she'd looked into the crystal and seen beauty and friendship, an idyllic world that called strongly to her. She'd denied that temptation once to walk her own road; now the Ranga Eyes were back in her life, back with Shounach. *I wish the smuggler hadn't told you where he got the eyes he sold. If it wasn't for those damn eyes you wouldn't have gone off with her . . . and left me . . . Madar bless, I don't know . . . I don't know . . . I don't know . . .* She jumped to her feet, jerked up the hood, walked quickly away.

Late that evening when she came back to her room, tired from wandering aimlessly about the market quarters, she shut the door and turned to find rain drifting in through the open shutters. With an exclamation of annoyance, she ran to the window and reached out to unhook the braces, the rain misting into her face.

Four large men came trotting down the street, rain painting highlights on their oiled skins and running down the sides of the elaborate litter they carried. Gleia recognized the blue curtains, stiffened, wondering whether she was glad or not to see it.

Shounach slid out, shook his bright head as the misting rain settled on his hair, pressed a lingering kiss onto the small, plump hand thrust through the curtains after him. Ignoring the rain slanting down harder now, he watched the litter move off, then looked up. When he saw Gleia, he grinned, waved, ran into the building.

Gleia swung the shutters closed and dropped the bar-latch. She moved to the bed and sat down, shoulders bent, feeling strange. All the pain, anger, and uncertainty was back.

He rapped on the door. "Gleia, open up."

She slid off the bed, kicked off her sandals, padded to the door. After a momentary hesitation, she turned the key in the lock and retreated to the windowseat. Her body tucked into the corner where the walls met, she sat with legs pulled up, hands resting on her knees.

Shounach stepped inside, shut the door, looked around. The only light in the room came from the torches in the hall, trickling in through the cracks around the door. He was a nervous shadow in the darkness. She could hear him moving about, could feel his an-

noyance in the jerky movement. He dropped his bag beside the bed. "Gleia?"

She closed her eyes. Accusations, bitter complaints, questions boiled inside her, all of them futile, it seemed to her. Without speaking she watched him light the lamp. Her hands were shaking again. She folded her arms across her breasts, hugging the cafta tight against herself, waiting for him to speak.

"Sitting in the dark?"

She examined his face, still saying nothing. He looked tired and irritated, but the grinding frustration that had been wearing him down was gone; he'd found out what he needed to know. She swallowed and let her eyes drop.

"Sulking?" He dropped onto the bed and began pulling off his boots. "Come here." With a grin he patted the bed beside him. "Got some good news."

She pulled her legs up farther, pushed back into the corner. "No."

He slipped out of the loose jacket and threw it on the floor by the boots. "What's eating at you?"

Sucking in a deep breath, she fought with the urge to spill her anger over him; she swallowed repeatedly, finally burst out, "Five damn days and not a word!"

"You knew where I was." He started undoing the fastening of his trousers. "And why I went there."

She heard the irritation in his voice as he snapped the words at her; it sparked her own anger. "So?" She wriggled out of the corner and swung her legs off the windowseat. "It couldn't have been that hard to get a word, one word, out to me. Let me know you're still alive. How do you think I feel when I hear how jealous the Lossal is of his daughter, that he'd poison half the city for her?" She leaned forward, her hands closed tight around the edge of the seat. "I saw her; she's beautiful. I never knew why you took up with me; you could decide to pack it in any time." She lifted her head, stared at him, the anger draining from her. He looked tired and unhappy. His shoulders slumped. He wiped a hand across his face, dropped the hand on his knee. Gleia closed her eyes a moment, opened them again, said, "You did forget me, didn't you?"

"You finished?"

"No. But what's the point of going further?" She shrugged. "I planned to leave tomorrow—when I thought you weren't coming back."

"And now that I have?"

"I don't know."

Gleia was leaning back against the shutters, her face lost in shadow. The loose cafta fell about her body, concealing it, but her hands were restless, fingers twitching, palms brushing over her thighs, shifting across the wood of the windowseat. Shounach suppressed a burst of anger, felt a frisson of fear as this repeated an old pain. He was afraid of his anger, afraid of what it made him do. She'd wriggled in under his skin without knowing what she'd done, had stirred up emotions he'd thought dead. He rubbed his hand across his face again. He was tired, half-sick with a self-loathing born of his pandering to Toreykyn's fancies, sick too from the ancient anger that drove him after the Ranga Eyes. He watched her hands a minute, then asked, "What do you want to do?" For the first time in far too many years he found himself caring about what another person decided; he could feel long-stifled emotions unfolding painfully. He tried to shut them away again as he waited for her answer, arms crossed tightly over his chest.

For several minutes she said nothing. Her hand lifted, her fingers moved slowly over her scars—her talismans. "I don't know."

"You said that before." He smiled briefly, let the smile fade when she continued to stare past him.

"I said it to myself a lot the past two, three days. Until I was sick of hearing it." She sat up, bringing her face into the light. "I don't know if I can run double; that's the truth."

"I see." He looked down at his boots, at the jacket falling over them. After wriggling out of his trousers, he carried bag, boots, and clothing to the wall pegs where Gleia's bag already hung, its canvas sides bulging. He touched it, looked over his shoulder at Gleia. "You're ready to go. All packed."

She thrust her fingers impatiently through her hair. "I told you."

"So you did." He dropped the bag and boots, hung jacket and pants on the pegs, then walked slowly back to the bed, stretching and yawning as he moved. After stripping the quilt back until it pooled at the foot of the bed, he lay down on his back, pulled a pillow under his head, folded it, wriggled about until he was comfortable. "Come here, Gleia. I'm tired of yelling across a room at you."

Smiling reluctantly, she shook her head. "I don't trust you, Fox. You could talk a tars into skinning himself for you."

"That windowseat looks damn uncomfortable and it gets cold before dawn." He rolled onto his side, propped himself up on an elbow and held out his hand. "Don't be silly, love. Come here and listen to the story of my life."

"Damn you, Fox." She slid off the windowseat. "Five days in that

bitch's bed. I should kick you out that window." She jerked her head back at the shutters, then began pulling the cafta over her head. Her words muffled, she went on, "You don't know how tempted I am." After draping the cafta over the unfinished shawl on the bedside table, she blew out the lamp, then stretched out beside Shounach, lying on her stomach, her head resting on crossed arms. "The story of your life?"

"A part of it." He smoothed his hand slowly down the curve of her back, her flesh cool and taut under his fingers. "I had a brother once." Catching hold of one of her curls, he drew the silky length between thumb and forefinger. "A long time ago. A half-brother really, although we grew up almost like twins."

She pushed his hand away, turned slightly on her side. "I'm making no promises, Shounach. Tell me what you want, but remember, it won't make any difference. I'll make up my own mind; I won't be pushed." She settled back on the bed. What he could see of her face was set in stubborn lines.

He turned on his back, stared into the shadows thick on the ceiling. "Remember how we met?"

"On that ship the Thissik stole. Why?"

"You told me you couldn't remember your parents. They must have been mountain folk." He lay silent. The noise from the taproom filtered up the stairs and hovered over them. Shounach could feel Gleia resisting him; she was moving away. *Could have been a mistake bringing her this close*, he thought. *I don't know*. He smiled into the darkness, scratched at an arm. *After three centuries of wandering, to know so little . . .*

"When the Thissik brought you in and dumped you on that bunk I thought I'd been fooling around too much with the Eyes. I saw my brother . . . you could have been his twin."

"Your brother?" She pushed up from the bed, swung around until she was sitting cross-legged, looking down at him. "Your brother? All this time you've been making love to your brother?" There was anger and revulsion in her voice. She started to slide off the bed.

He caught her ankle. "Don't be stupid."

"Let go." She kicked her foot, trying to shake him loose.

He hesitated a minute then released her. "Go if you want." At the same time he rolled over, turning his back on her, waiting tensely to see if his gamble worked. There was silence for several minutes then he heard the sheets rustling as she stretched out on her stomach again.

"Well?" The word was sharp, almost spat at him.

"Well what?" He grinned into the darkness, but kept his amusement out of his voice.

"What has your brother got to do with anything?"

"Ummmph." He turned on his back again, punched the pillow up, angled his head so he could see her. Her face was lost in shadow, her curls tumbling forward until all he could see was the curve of her jawline. "Half-brother," he said, and saw her start at the sound of his voice. "Same father, different mothers; my mother was a red-haired witch with a curse on her head. She . . ." He stopped abruptly, finding after all that he couldn't talk about her even now. "Never mind. My brother had a temper like yours, Gleia. Lava-hot one minute, gone the next. I was different. I held grudges a long, long time, love. Far beyond any reasonable point. I found a Ranga Eye one day, fished it out of the river that ran past the back of the house where my family lived. If you're interested, that's the river that comes to sea a little south of Carhenas."

Gleia made a soft startled sound. He shifted onto his side, smoothed the hair back off her face, touched the scars on her cheek. "Odd to think we might be related, isn't it?"

"I thought you were off-world born. You let me think that."

He raised up on his elbow and began smoothing his hand over her back. "I don't talk about this much. I killed my brother."

"Shounach." She wriggled around, caught his hand—then drew back, peered through the darkness at his face, her skepticism returning.

He closed his hand about hers, drawing strength from her. The next part was painful; no matter how he struggled to distance himself from the memory, he could still see his brother's emptied face. "I was about six standard-years old, Gleia. The Eye was shining in the gravel at the bottom of the river. I took it to the bench where my father liked to spend his mornings and sat with it, turning it over and over, fascinated as it began playing its dreams for me. You know. Before it could take me, the bell rang for the evening Madarchant. I hid the Eye in the roots of the tree and went inside. The next day my brother and I quarrelled over . . . something. Something so unimportant I can't even remember what it was. That night I set the Eye beside him, then went to bed, pleased with myself, figuring he'd lose a night's sleep and be punished for it in the morning. He must have been extra-sensitive. In the morning he was already lost. Burnt hollow." He pulled his hand free, moved away from her, lay staring up into the shifting shadows. The ancient anger was growing; he struggled to control it. "I ran away," he

muttered. "Couldn't face up to what I'd done. Got off-world after a while. Wandered about a lot, running away from myself much as anything. Taught myself not to feel. Something happened not long ago, sent me back here."

"Hunting for the Ranga Eyes."

"Hunting," he said harshly. Turning his head to her, he half-smiled, a quick upward jerking of one corner of his mouth. "I told you I hold grudges a long time."

Outside, the rain hissed down, drumming steadily against the shutters. Voices from the taproom below rose and fell. In the silence that followed, Shounach could hear curses as a man was thrown out into the wet, then his pounding feet as he ran for another shelter. Beside him Gleia shifted restlessly; she pushed up on one elbow and flattened her hand on his chest. She was smiling a little, the whites of her eyes gleaming softly in the dimness. "What happened these past six days?" Catching a bit of flesh between thumb and fingernail, she pinched hard. "And don't brag about your conquest. I don't want to hear about it."

He laughed, happy with her, caught her hand. "You delight me, my vixen. Damn, I've missed you."

She pulled away. "No promises, Fox." Her voice was cool; she wasn't about to let him talk her into forgetting her doubts.

He sucked in a deep breath, let it explode out. "What happened? I performed for the household and for the daughter of the House. In between times I wandered about, asked a few questions, listened a lot, and found out nothing at all about the Lossal and the Ranga Eyes. Though I listened to more than I wanted to hear about the Lossal and his activities." He yawned, then laced his hands over his ribs. "Until last night."

He slid carefully from the bed, stood looking down at the sleeping Toreykyn, filled with soul-weariness and self-loathing. "Whore," he whispered and didn't mean the woman snoring slightly, her face slack, empty for once of the greed and fretfulness that marred its beauty. He passed a hand over his face, then turned away from her, trying to throw off his weariness of body and spirit.

Aab's light crept through the curtains, turned the darkness into a pearl-grey shimmer. Shounach dressed quickly, then knelt beside his bag, reaching through the membrane into the hyper-pocket for his tools. He hung a tingler in his ear, a pear-shaped red gem that would warn him of electronic spying. The Lossal's iron birds had startled him; they had no place in this pre-industrial society. As he

slid the finder ring on his finger, he wondered idly about the source of the birds. Off-world trader probably. He turned the grey-white stone inward, his lips tightening as he saw a faint glimmer in the dull gem. The finder was tuned to Ranga Eyes. For the first time he had evidence of their connection with the Lossal. He transferred lock picks, a small stunner, a cutter, and a laser rod to his pocket, then closed the bag.

Toreykyn stirred, muttered. Holding his breath, Shounach went quickly back to her. She was still asleep but moving restlessly. He touched her temples, concentrated, sent her deeper into sleep. Straightening, he drew the tips of his fingers down his jacket. She was snoring again, soft little whistling snores. She even lisps in her sleep, he thought. His revulsion passed off and he felt only pity. She was, after all, a rather stupid woman without enough imagination to be evil.

He left her and moved to the window. For the past two days he'd been trying to get into the room the Lossal called his library. He'd tried every avenue he could discover, had returned again and again at different times during the day and night; there were guards around all the time, people going in and out at all hours of day and night. There was one last thing he could try—going in from the outside. He slipped through the heavy drapes and went into the window on his stomach. The wall here was five feet thick and the window narrowed as it went outward, but it was still high enough for him to sit upright when he reached the outer opening. He wriggled around until he was sitting with his legs dangling among the vine tendrils, the over-sweet perfume of the vine fruit strong around him.

The garden below was silent, filled with a peace that seemed to mock him. The shrubbery and trees were dark areas separated by the paler grass and the silver glint of streams converging on the fountain in the center. Beyond the garden, the wall that shut in the privileged part of the city was dark and sullen, its crenellations etched against the torchlight from the market quarter beyond. He started to push out of the window, then stopped as he saw three figures moving at a rapid walk from the Stranger's Quarter, heading for the inner gate. He watched with considerable curiosity, high enough so he could look down into the wide street but too high to see more than vague dark shapes. As the shapes disappeared behind the wall, Shounach felt heat against the palm of his hand. He looked down, excitement cold in his stomach. Slowly he unfolded his fingers, uncovering the finder gem. The glow was getting stronger.

As the three appeared on the near side of the gate, a pair of iron

birds swooped from the house to circle around the gate towers. Shounach frowned, then pushed out from the window and floated down close to the wall, dropping through wavering vine tendrils, his eyes fixed on the birds.

He landed crouching, scrambled back into the shadow close to the wall. The vine stalks were ancient twisting monsters with loose, fibrous bark that curled away from the inner wood and came loose at the slightest touch, clinging to the material of his trousers, even to his bare feet and hands. He grimaced, brushed cautiously at the itchy fragments, looking out through the skim of leaves at the birds.

One of them hesitated in its circle, then came soaring around over the garden. Shounach slid his hand into his jacket pocket, closed his fingers about the laser rod, silently cursing the bird. He had to get a look at those men, had to know who was bringing the Ranga Eyes to the Lossal. The smell of the vine fruit was stronger, near-stifling here. The leaves whispered, the vine stalks groaned and thrummed in the rising wind. In the trees and brushes he could hear a few night birds crying, night insects creaking and chirping. And over all the small night sounds, he could hear the steady humming of the iron bird.

It circled the garden and came back along the House wall. Ruby light shot suddenly from the eye and began sweeping along the wall's base. Shounach waited tensely; once he used the laser, he'd have to get out fast. The red light splashed on stone and leaves, moved swiftly toward him.

The gate in the garden wall swung open and the three men came through. Two were Lossalni Harriers, the third a boatman from upriver; an important man, Shounach thought, judging by his strut. An ugly, arrogant man hugging a large leather pouch against his barrel belly. Shounach stared greedily, his ring hand clenched in a fist, the ring-fire burning into his palm. Madar be blessed, he thought, echoing the formula of his childhood. The Fox's luck, as Gleia would say. Forgetting about the searching bird, he stared at the man, fixing the blunt, lined features in his mind.

The boatman looked up, saw the bird. "Get that damn thing away from me." He stopped walking, glared stubbornly at the Harrier. "Not another step till that abomination is gone."

Shounach started, then held himself very still as the bark and leaves rustled noisily against the stone; he cursed the obsession that made him forget the danger he was in, looked back at the bird. The red light had stopped moving about six feet from him and the bird was bouncing up and down in the air as if it rode invisible waves.

"It sensed something or someone in the garden. I'll . . ." The Harrier broke off as the bird hummed away from the wall and darted back to the gate. "Must've been nothing. Come on. No talking once we're inside. Not till we're with the Lossal." The boatman nodded and the three men walked rapidly across the garden to the recessed door with its small flight of steps. Shounach crouched in the shadows, not daring to follow them, watching them go with a sick feeling of futility. Shaking with anger and frustration, he pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, trying to convince himself that he had all he needed. He's a boatman and I know his face. He leaned against the stone, dizzy from the fumes of the vine fruit, too tired to force himself farther.

"I went back to the room, tucked things back in the bag, slept hard until Toreykyn woke me the next morning." He yawned, turned on his side, trying to make out her features in the darkness.

Gleia pushed her hair back from her face, raised on one elbow. "A boatman." She swung up, sat cross-legged, elbows on her knees, chin braced on her hands, her curls falling forward around her face as she focused her eyes on him. "You've got the next step. What now?" She hesitated a moment, then went on, "Deel says the Stareyn is close to dying."

"Deel?"

"You saw her—that time you went off with Toreykyn. The dancer standing next to me. She says when the Stareyn dies, the Families lock the gates and don't let anyone in or out until the Stareyn's Lot has been cast and the new Stareyn installed. That could make problems for you."

"For me?"

"Deel's leaving soon; she asked me to go south with her."

"I see. Are you?"

"I don't know." She started laughing, straightened her back, stretched extravagantly, then folded her arms across her breasts. "Stop pushing, Fox." She yawned suddenly. "Madar, I'm tired." She patted at her mouth, yawned again. "In the morning. We can talk this out in the morning."

Gleia jerked upright, dazed with sleep, as the door slammed open and a Harrier stalked inside. Shounach came awake like a startled animal, diving off the bed in a swift movement that changed into an awkward scramble as the quilt twisted around his legs. He kicked it away and ran for his bag.

The Harrier yelled an order and Shounach came to an abrupt stop, a sword at his throat. A third man came in, an archer. He stepped away from the door, a bolt ready in his crossbow, his dark, cynical eyes turning between Gleia and Shounach. The leader of the three waved a hand; Shounach was backed into the center of the room where he stood, narrowed eyes turning constantly as he searched for an opening. The lead Harrier tossed Shounach's clothing at his feet. "Get dressed," he said crisply. He turned to Gleia. "You too, girl. On your feet and put something on." While Gleia pulled the cafta over her head and smoothed it down, he moved about the room, poking into its meager furnishings, tossing the two bags onto the bed, throwing the unfinished shawl over them. Shounach fastened his trousers and slipped his arms into the sleeves of his loose open jacket, watching grimly as the burly lead Harrier thrust his arm through the two straps and shrugged the bags up against his side. He turned to frown at Shounach. "The Lossal wants you. Don't try nothin'; Herv there can wing a gnat." He nodded at the archer. "We can tie you on a pole and haul you to him like a side of meat. Or you can walk. Up to you."

"I walk." Shounach held out his hand. Gleia took it and together they walked out the door, the leader ahead and the other two Harriers following close behind.

The rain had stopped; the pavement glistened wetly in starlight that had broken through the tattered clouds. The torches were extinguished in front of the taverns and all the buildings in the Stranger's Quarter were dark and silent. In the near distance she could hear the shouts and other noises of the produce carts coming into the produce market. The only other sounds were the shuffle of their feet on the wet stone.

The Library was a large room, filled with racks of scrolls and layers of flat pages sewn together. Between the piles of books, the piles of scrolls, sat small statues, vases, objects that glowed with color. The corners of the room disappeared in red-tinted gloom as the dawn light fanned through the line of long, narrow windows in the outer wall, red light with motes dancing in the beams like points of fire. The Lossal sat behind a massive table in a low-backed massive chair. He was a small man with an exuberant halo of white hair touched dramatically with crimson by the light pouring in the window just behind him, haloed in crimson light so that his features other than the pale glint of colorless eyes were lost in shadow. He sat waiting for them, watching them intently as the Harriers es-



corted them into the room. The leader set the two bags on the table in front of him.

"As ordered, Lossal-vas."

The chair and table had elongated legs so the old man's eyes were on a level with theirs though he was sitting while they stood. His pale eyes moved past the Juggler, stopped on Gleia. "Why'd you bring the woman?"

"She was in bed with him, Lossal-vas."

Gleia shivered as she saw him frown, then glance upward. *Deel's wrong*, she thought. *He knows about Toreykyn's fancies. He knows about her and Shounach.*

The Lossal leaned forward and hooked Shounach's bag toward him. He flipped the top back and pulled out the contents—the blue glass balls, the red crystals, three small gilded dragons, a gilt dancer balancing on one foot, some bits of faceted glass, cheap brass jewelry, some crumpled scarves and dingey rags and fragments, other odds and ends. He upended the bag, shook it, then set it aside. Pushing the balls about with his forefinger, he smiled tightly at Shounach. "These look a lot better by torchlight and at a distance. Like you, Juggler." Sweeping everything from the table back into the bag, he dropped the bag beside his chair, then began investigating Gleia's possessions. As he fingered her spare caftas and

reached for the unfinished shawl, Gleia forced herself to stay quiet, anger burning in her at this invasion of her privacy. He unfolded the shawl, touched the design, fingered the needle, then swept the shawl aside and took up the two handkerchiefs. He spread them out on the table before him, ran his fingers over the fine stitching. He dug through the rest of the things in the bag—her bag of thread, her book of needles, the tambour hoop, the small thread-knife with its razor-edged half-inch blade and horn casing, a ragged brush and some cakes of black ink, some parchment for sketching designs. He unrolled the wrinkled parchment, examined the scribbled sketches. After contemplating these for several minutes, he pushed the other things aside and pulled the shawl back in front of him. Smoothing the soft black triangle out on the table, he ran his fingers slowly along the band of silver and green embroidery above the elaborately knotted fringe.

Fuming and impotent, Gleia hugged her arms across her breasts and refused to look at the old man. The room was still; the only sounds were the soft rasp of the old man's dry fingers over the cloth and the steady breathing of the men beside her. There was a dry, dusty smell to the room, a dusty smell to the old man as if he sat here like a withered spider, fingers on the threads of his plots.

The Lossal dropped the shawl and leaned back in his massive chair, dominating it and the room by the cold intensity of his colorless eyes. "Bring the woman closer."

Gleia jerked her arm away from the Harrier's hand, marched up to the table and stood glaring at the Lossal, too angry to give in to the fear that was clutching her stomach.

The Lossal leaned forward, frowned. "Turn your face." His eyes opened a little wider. "Show me the marks."

Reluctantly, Gleia turned her head. She moved stiffly, forcing herself to an outward calm she was far from feeling inside. Her fingers twitched; her hand stirred, started to lift to her face; she stiffened her arm, brought her hand back to her side.

"Carhenas marks. Thief?"

"Yes." Her voice was harsh. Though he waited, obviously expecting her to expand her statement or justify herself, she said nothing more.

He placed his hands palm down on the shawl. "Your work?"

"Yes."

"You're his woman?" He pointed at the Juggler.

Gleia stirred; she glanced at Shounach's blank face, then she shrugged. "For now."

He reached over, picked up the limp money bag, his eyes on her, a small tight smile curving his thin lips. "You don't need this now." His smile widened and he tossed the pouch to the leader of the Harriers. "A small bonus for a good job, Ciyger."

Gleia clenched her hands, watching the money she and Shounach had worked hard to earn thrown so negligently away. Anger and a growing fear alternately burned and chilled her. Once again her skill was saving her neck; her fear wasn't for herself. What she'd begun to understand on Zuwayl's ship was coming clearer to her. What happened to Shounach happened to her; she was vulnerable in a way she'd never been before. The thought dismayed her, made her more uncertain than ever about what path she should take in the future.

"Move aside, girl." The Lossal's impatient command brought her from her unhappy thoughts; hastily she moved from in front of him and stood watching as the Harriers brought Shounach forward.

She stared. He looked furtive, cunning; his shoulders were rounded, his head thrust forward, an ingratiating smile twisted his mouth upward. Unconsciously she relaxed, realizing that the Fox was fitting himself into the Lossal's image of him, intending that the Lossal despise him and in despising him underestimate his capability. She glanced at the Lossal, saw him watching her, began to feel uneasy again. She clasped her hands behind her and tried to keep her face blank.

The Lossal shifted his gaze to Shounach. "Juggler." His voice was silken smooth. Gleia heard amusement crouching behind the softness and felt a lump of ice growing in her stomach. His next words weren't a surprise, she'd been waiting for them since the Harriers had broken in on them. "Tell me what you were doing in the garden last night."

The smile was wiped from Shounach's face; he looked startled and increasingly nervous. He rubbed a shaking hand over his mouth and stared at the floor. Forgotten for the moment, Gleia began to enjoy his performance. *Nothing overstated*, she thought. *He's turned into a whole other person.* "The bird spotted me," he muttered. He shivered, his eyes turning and turning, visibly searching for some escape from this difficulty. The Lossal waited, fingers tapping on the table. Shounach seemed to collapse in on himself. "I'm a thief," he said sullenly. "Too many people in the halls, couldn't lay my hands on anything worth the trouble. I went down the wall, meant to come inside on this floor, see if I could pick up something worth putting my head in the strangler's noose." When he finished, his

words were coming fast, piling out one on top the other, but the last words trailed off under the Lossal's cool and skeptical gaze.

Reptilian lids drooping over pale eyes, the Lossal studied Shounach's face. "You could be the trash you seem." He waved away Shounach's protests. "No matter. I'll find out." The jerk of his head brought the lead Harrier to the table. "Take that downstairs; tell Ottan Ironmaster to play with him a little, find out what he knows. I don't think he'll find anything interesting so he doesn't have to waste effort trying to keep the Juggler alive. Leave one of your men here to take the girl."

Gleia swung around, her hands pressed briefly over her mouth, then pulled back to her sides. Shounach went without further protest, without even a look at her. *It would have worked*, Gleia thought. *It would have worked except for Toreykyn.* She turned back to face the Lossal. His hands were folded on the table; a small, satisfied smile pulled his thin lips into a tight arc. She suppressed a shudder. She must have made some sound, though she wasn't aware of it; he swivelled his head and examined her, his smile widening as he enjoyed her distress. He began touching the shawl again, watching her intently as he pinched and smoothed the material. A faint flush bloomed in his cheeks; the tip of his nose reddened. Gleia began sweating. She swallowed, nauseated by the feeling that his hands were moving over her body.

He pushed the shawl away and leaned back. "You're gifted with your hands, girl."

She stared at him.

"No point in wasting that talent." He got up smoothed his robes down over his small round belly, walked across the room to the guard. "Put her in a room in the servants' quarters, away from the others, put a guard outside to see she stays there. See she's fed, bring me the shawl when she's finished with it." He strolled out leaving Gleia seething behind him.

The Harrier reached for her. She jerked away. "I need my things," she snapped.

He scowled at her. "Don't take all day."

Gleia moved around the table without arguing. For the moment she was too tired to keep fighting. She folded her things and put them back into her bag, ignoring the Harrier's impatient muttering. When she leaned over, reaching for one of the handkerchiefs, she kicked something on the floor. Shounach's bag was sitting beside the Lossal's chair. She folded the handkerchief with shaking hands and slipped it into her bag. The Harrier was fidgeting by the door,

paying little attention to her. She caught the strap of Shounach's bag and slipped it over her shoulder, then covered it with the strap of her own. Holding her bag in front of the other, she walked slowly to the door, her shoulders slumped in weary acceptance of her servitude, trying to hide her nervous anxiety.

The Harrier grunted impatiently and urged her out of the room, too much in a hurry to bother about what she carried. She walked ahead of him along the high, echoing hall to a pair of swinging doors. On the far side of the doors the hall was smaller and a great deal rougher. A few horn lamps lit the undressed stone of wall and ceiling; the coarse matting on the floor was worn but thick enough to muffle footsteps. They passed several closed doors then came to a busy kitchen. Gleia's stomach cramped as she smelled the scent of cooking food. She stopped walking. The Harrier went on two steps before he realized she was no longer with him. He wheeled, grabbed for her. She evaded his fingers. "The Lossal told you to see I'm fed. Food and candles. I need both." She faced him, her head up, her eyes defiant. For the moment she didn't give a damn about anything.

Reading this in her face, he backed away. "Wait here."

He left her standing in the hallway outside the kitchen. She was tempted to slip away but she couldn't leave Shounach. She hugged his bag against her hip, wondering what was happening to him, then shied away from the thought. *He can't die. It would be absurd for him to die now.* Even as she thought this, she knew that any one could die any time, absurd or not.

The Harrier came back with a covered pannikin and a handful of candles, thrust both at her and hustled her on down the hall. After turning several corners, he caught her arm and shoved her inside a small room. After he slammed the door and stalked off, she tossed the two bags onto a narrow cot and looked nervously about. There was a small barred window, and a table holding a battered candlestick clotted with wax. She put the pannikin and the candles on the table, stretched, then went quickly to the door and pulled it open.

A Harrier was coming down the hall, not the one who'd brought her. He speeded up to a trot, opened his mouth to speak. She shut the door.

There was a narrow space between cot and table, just wide enough to let her walk back and forth. She paced nervously, angry, confused, and afraid, worried about Shounach, worried far more about Shounach than she was for herself. Back and forth until her legs ached. Back and forth, rubbing her sweating palms up and down her sides,

feeling the rough material of her cafta riding up and down against her skin. Abruptly she kicked the stool from under the table and sat, taking the lid off the pannikin. There was a hunk of bread soaking in a thick stew. It smelled good and re-awakened her hunger. She fished the spoon out of the gravy and began eating.

The morning dragged by. Again and again, she went to the door, but the guard was always there. She tried talking with him. He told her to get back inside and stay there, said nothing else. She worked on and off at the shawl, stopping when her hands began to shake, paced a while, sat down again to send the needle dancing in and out of the material as her mind circled endlessly and futilely around and around Shounach and her own "trilemma" of choice.

Once Shounach and she were loose, she could let him go off on his obsessive quest and strike out on her own. In a way that was the easiest road, the most comfortable choice. She wouldn't have to change at all, just go on the way she always had. She could sell the shawl or trade it for passage to another city where she could keep herself with her skill. There were times when this path seemed irresistible, when she was sick of trying to adapt herself to another person's needs, friend or lover.

Deel had asked her to go south with her. The dancer was brisk and practical; she represented a way of life that was strange and exotic to Gleia. The dancer fascinated her both as a person and as a symbol.

Or she could go on with Shounach, trying to learn the rules of pairing, finding herself forgotten again and again as he pursued the source of the Ranga Eyes, moving in and out of danger with him, living in pain and fear and confusion. But never bored.

Late in the afternoon she was sitting on the edge of the cot, the shawl on her knees, her mind milling in its endless circle. She jerked her head up, tried to smile as Deel swept inside. The dancer shut the door, leaned against it, her arms crossed below her breasts. "Some mess you got yourself in."

"How did you know?" Gleia tucked the needle into the material and folded the shawl into a neat square.

"Merd." Deel laughed, left the door and went to sit beside Gleia. She dropped a hand on Gleia's, a brief comforting touch, then wriggled around until she was leaning against the wall, her long legs tucked to one side. "He got me in here to dance for the Lossal, guess he figured he could make points if they liked me. They stick us artists with the servants." She chuckled. "Unless like your Juggler we're sleeping with the masters. Anyway, the servants, they're buzz-

ing like a bunch of night-crawlers about you and your friend." She wiggled long fingers at the door. "The guard out there, he's seen me with Merd so he let me in. Why the hell'd the Juggler go fooling about in the garden?"

Gleia ran her hands over her curls, shook her head. "He had good reasons. You said it right, Deel. Some mess. You better keep away from us."

"Get away's a better way to say it." Deel sucked in her lower lip, bit down on it with small white teeth. "The servants got other things to talk about. They say the Stareyn is laid out, barely breathing, that he could go any minute. Look, I'm not going to be penned up in this stinking city while a bunch of power-hungry families fight for the Stareynate. Bad enough if I was sworn to one of the Families. I figure people like you and me, we're going to get squashed. I'm not hanging around for that. We could get out of the city, go south like I said." She narrowed amber eyes. "I don't suppose you'd care to forget the Juggler?"

"Not while he's in here." Gleia rubbed nervously at her forehead. "You know where they've got him?"

"I can find out."

"Be careful."

"You're telling me?" Deel grinned. "I'll be so damn careful nobody'll know I'm around. Can you use a knife? I could get us a couple."

"Deel, I grew up running the streets. You know what that means."

"Yeah. Too well." She pushed up off the bed. "I'd better get back. I have to be dancing soon. It'll be late when I come; better that way, I suppose; most of the place should be asleep." Deel touched Gleia's cheek, then swirled out of the room with a flutter of her favorite amber silk.

The candle was guttering in the gusts of cold air coming through the window. Gleia paced back and forth past the table, her distorted shadow jerking dramatically on the wall. She wheeled and faced the door as she heard voices, then a choking sound and a thud. The door opened and Deel stepped in over the body of a Harrier. She bent down and took hold of one of his arms. "Help me. Quick."

Together they pulled the dead man into the small room. As Gleia shouldered the two bags, she looked down at the Harrier. He was very young; she hadn't noticed how young he was before. He had a wispy blond moustache, a scattering of pimples on his nose and cheeks, a reed-thin neck. Deel pulled her knife loose, wiped it on his trousers. She looked up at Gleia. "Had to be done."

"I know. I don't have to like it." Gleia shifted the straps to settle the bags more comfortably then took the knife Deel handed her. With a last glance at the dead boy, she followed the dancer out of the room, pulling the door shut behind her.

Talking softly as she walked, Deel said, "Far as I can tell, there won't be any Harriers down below. The Lossal left with a bunch of them not so long ago. There's no one in the halls, not in this part of the house anyway. Feels like they're all shivering in their beds. Bet the Stareyn's really going this time. Piece of luck for us since that keeps the old viper busy." Her hand on Gleia's arm, the dancer pulled her along the hall and around the corner. "The stairs to the cellars are just ahead. We better not talk after this." She stepped briskly ahead of Gleia, pulling her dark cloak tight against her body. Stopping in front of a heavy door, she swung it open enough to slip through. Gleia followed, eased the door shut behind her.

She found herself on a small square platform at the top of a steep stairway, one side against the wall, the other a precipitous drop to a floor some distance below. Gleia moved quickly to the wall side, refusing to look down again. Deel glanced back at her, grinning, her teeth glistening in the uncertain light from the torch burning smokily halfway down the stairs. Fingertips of one hand brushing the wall, Deel ran down the stairs, sure-footed and silent, her dancer's body balancing easily. Gleia followed more cautiously. The darkness off the side spread in a vast silent cellar under the floor of the House, dark and eerie, amplifying the slightest sounds until the whisper of her feet on the stone came back to her as a harsh susurrous like the breathing of some great animal.

At the bottom of the flight Deel stopped her. "Cells just ahead," she whispered. "Through there." She pointed at a torchlit arch a few feet farther along the wall. "I'll go in first, distract the guard. When you see a chance, take him out." She stripped off her cloak, handed it to Gleia, patted at her hair, moistened her lips, shook her arms, took several deep breaths. "Don't wait too long, hon." Without waiting for an answer she moved toward the arch, hesitantly at first, then with her usual swinging swagger.

Gleia hurried after her, feeling it almost like a shock to the heart when the dancer vanished through the opening. At the arch, she dropped to her knees, edged forward until she could see what was happening.

Deel was smiling at the only man in the room, a hard-faced thug with a hairy bare chest, short bowed legs encased in greasy trousers, knotty bare feet. He wore a leather apron stiff with old stains. Deel

touched his bulging arm with a teasing giggle, dancing back as he grabbed for her.

He scowled at her, moved around the table where he'd been sitting, stopped in front of her. "Who you, girl? What you doin' here?"

Deel circled closer, ran her slim red-brown fingers up his arm. "I wanted to see the strongest man in Istir." She danced around behind him, running her fingers over the massive muscles of his shoulders, reappearing on the other side of him, pulling him around so his back was to the arch. "Show me how strong you are."

The man lunged clumsily at her, his meaty hip knocking aside the table. He was at least half drunk. There were two empty bottles on the floor and a third rolling across the table top. It smashed against the stone as Deel danced away before the Ironmaster, smiling and flirting her eyes at him, narrowly avoiding his groping fingers, the slotted skirt swirling around her long slim legs, her light teasing laughter bringing the blood to his face. He lumbered after her, caught her arm, pulled her against him.

Gleia slipped the straps from her shoulder, was up and on her feet, running for him. As he held Deel helpless against him, his mouth avid on hers, Gleia drove the knife between his ribs, slamming the blade home with all her strength.

With an animal bellow he threw Deel sprawling and turned on Gleia, his animal strength as awesome as his ugliness. She fled, terror dark in her.

Then he faltered, his face went blank, he coughed, spat blood, crumpled to the floor, falling on his face. Feeling a little sick, Gleia looked at Deel. The dancer rose slowly to her feet, walked to the Ironmaster, scrubbing and rubbing at her mouth. She thrust her toe in his ribs. He gurgled, moved his hands slightly. Deel beckoned impatiently to Gleia. "Come on. Help me turn him over." The dancer caught one of the man's thick wrists in both hands. "Hurry, I don't know how long we got. The keys, Gleia. We need his keys. And take your knife back."

They labored several minutes, finally got the heavy body on its back. Gleia ran her bloody knife under the leather thong that held his keyring, cut it free. While Deel stood watch near the arch, Gleia ran along the line of cells.

In the third cell a dark figure lay sprawled on a rough plank bench. "Shounach?" she hissed.

The figure stirred, tried to sit up, collapsed. Hands shaking, breath harsh in her throat, Gleia tried the keys until the lock finally turned over. When she slipped inside, he was trying to sit up, using the



backs of his hands to push against the planks. He looked up, moved his battered mouth into a slight smile. "What took you so long?" The words were slow and slurred so badly it took her a while to understand what he was saying. He lurched heavily and was finally sitting. She reached out.

"No!" The word was whispered but vehement. She waited, biting her lip, hugging herself, as he got slowly and painfully to his feet. In the dim light from the torches outside the cell she saw that he was naked, his body covered by cuts and bruises, his face distorted into a crude mask hardly human. He stretched out one trembling arm. "Let me lean on you, love. I'm a bit sore for hugging." Again his words were indistinct, spoken slowly and with difficulty. His arm came down on her shoulders until she was supporting much of his weight. "Not too fast," he muttered.

Deel gave an exclamation of horror when they emerged. She brought the Ironmaster's chair and helped Gleia ease Shounach into it; then she stepped back and raised an eyebrow. "Juggler, you're a mess." Gleia bit her lip, ran to the arch.

She came back with the garish bag hugged against her breasts. When he reached for it, she gasped. The inner side of his fingers and both palms were seared black, the skin charred and cracking.

She looked from the bag to him, not knowing what to do.

Shounach examined his hands, grimaced. He was badly beaten, his face bruised and swollen, his back raw with lashmarks that circled around his ribcage and ended in ragged purpled cuts. There were marks of the hot iron on his groin and flat stomach. His mouth moved in a painful smile. Swollen and reddened, his changeable eyes glinted green. "Companion," he murmured. He brushed her hand with the backs of his fingers. "You are a delight. Hold the bag open in front of me. Deel?"

"What?" The dancer glanced anxiously at the arch, then back to the battered man.

"See if you can find my clothes. They should be somewhere around here." As she swung off, he grimaced, opened and closed his savaged hands, then reached into the bag.

"Fox, can't I do that for you?"

"No." Sweating, his face twisted with pain, he pulled a small leather case from the bag and dropped it onto his thighs. He reached in again and pulled out a thick roll of bandage. He leaned back carefully, closed his eyes, said wearily, "Put the bag down and open the case for me."

The case opened easily when the two sides were pressed apart. Following Shounach's instructions she tipped a pale blue wafer from one of the vials and slipped it between his lips.

While he was resting, waiting for the drug to act, Deel came back with his jacket, trousers, and boots. She dumped them on the floor beside him. "Can't we hurry this? I'm having a fit every few minutes when I think of someone finding us like this." She waved a hand at the arch.

"You can leave if you want." Gleia began smoothing a thick white liquid over Shounach's cuts, bruises, and burns. Sighing with impatience Deel began helping her. Together they covered him with the pain-deadening antiseptic and began wrapping the gauze bandaging around his body, finishing with his hands, wrapping the gauze neatly over the palms and, at his whispered instructions, around each of his fingers so he could use them. When they were done he stood, swaying a little at first, working his fingers stiffly.

He dressed quickly. When he'd stamped his feet into his boots, he looked around, his eyes pale grey with effort, glittering with the effects of the pain and the drug. Gleia watched, worried, then went slowly to the arch to fetch her own bag. When she returned he was kneeling beside his bag.

He pulled out one of the blue spheres, then got unsteadily to his

feet with a grunt of effort.

"Shounach?" She touched his arm, but he ignored her and walked away from her, stumbling a little, then stopped by the body of the Ironmaster. He dropped the ball on the man's chest, watched as it rolled down the slope of his belly and came to a stop between his legs. Gleia shivered at the expression on his face, remembered him saying, *I hold grudges a long, long time*. She closed her fingers around his wrist, careful not to touch the burns. "Shounach!"

He blinked at her, awareness slowly returning to his eyes. His face was shiny with the liquid she'd spread over his bruises, his long red hair was matted, dark with blood and sweat. She chewed on her lip, then went back to the bags, slipped both straps over her shoulder.

Deel was fidgeting in the archway, fastening the clasp of her cloak. "You two ready?" she hissed. "We're really pushing our luck, hanging around like this."

"I think so." Gleia moved to Shounach's side, offering her shoulder as a prop.

With Deel striding ahead, Gleia and Shounach following more slowly, they went up the stairs and eased into the servants' quarters. The rough, narrow hall was deserted and dark, most of the horn lamps blown out.

A few steps past the silent, empty kitchen, Shounach called softly to Deel, dragged Gleia through a door into a small, empty room. Deel followed, startled and a little annoyed. "What . . ."

"Quiet." Shounach leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. "Someone's coming."

For a moment they heard nothing, then confused footsteps and deep voices as several men strolled past. The sounds faded but the Juggler continued to wait, pain and weariness dragging at his face. Finally he opened his eyes and pushed away from the wall. "All clear. Let's go."

Deel turned amber eyes on him as he settled his arm on Gleia's shoulders. "You're something else, Juggler. For a while there I thought I'd made a big mistake." She grinned and swung out, the swagger back in her walk. Gleia saw a flicker of appreciation in Shounach's slitted eyes; she poked him gently in the ribs. He grunted, grinned down at her, wincing as a cut on his lip reopened. "Vixen."

She sniffed. "Fox."

Deel thrust her head back inside. "Come on, you idiots."

They moved swiftly through the dark silent house. Just inside the door to the garden Shounach stopped them again.

Deel leaned close, whispered, "Someone outside?"

"No. Those damn iron birds." He closed his eyes a moment, pulled his arm from Gleia's shoulder, leaned against the wall, the false energy from the drug beginning to melt away. Eyes still closed he said, "Gleia, bring my bag here and hold it open for me."

"You all right?" As she held the bag up, she watched him anxiously.

"No." He reached into the bag, sweat gathering on his forehead. "Silly question." He pulled out a small rod, handed it to her, glanced over his shoulder at Deel who was fidgeting with curiosity and impatience. "Hang on a minute, dancer."

"This is the slowest escape I ever heard of. Good thing the Lossal's busy in the Kiralydom." She twitched her cloak higher on her shoulders.

Shounach returned to Gleia, touched one end of the rod. "Twist this a half-turn and be damn careful what else you touch." When she'd done that, he continued. "The black spot is a sensor. If one of the iron birds shows up, point the rod at it, touch the sensor, slice the beam through the bird. Don't use it unless you have to." He looked bleak for a moment. "I hate to see that here. I hate seeing those damn birds on this world." He watched as Gleia twisted the cover back over the sensor. "Be careful with that. Deel, lend me a shoulder so Gleia can keep a hand free."

"About time."

They moved across the garden and stopped in the shadow of the wall. Deel looked up. "Hope you've got a few more tricks, Juggler. Don't think I can climb that." She watched him expectantly, waiting for him to come up with another bit of magic. Aab's swelling crescent broke through the scatter of clouds, the silver light turning the dancer into an exotic figure wholly out of place in the garden.

Gleia held the rod tight in a sweaty hand, her eyes fixed on him. "Can you do it?"

"Think so." He rubbed the back of his bandaged hand along her cheek. "You first."

"No."

"Don't argue. Help me sit. Stretch out flat once you're up. You hear?"

She nodded then eased him down until he was sitting cross-legged on the grass. Then she moved close to the wall. "Ready, Fox."

She felt something grip her body, something like a tight second skin. It held her, lifted her. She rose slowly up the wall. When she reached the top he shifted her to the right a few inches then turned

her loose. She stumbled, went to her knees. Then she stretched out flat, her body in the shadow of the thinner crenellations. Below, Deel gasped and rose into the air. In seconds she was flat beside Gleia, temporarily speechless.

When Shounach reached to top, he let go suddenly and slammed into the stone hard enough to send the air from his lungs in a small puffing sound.

Gleia touched his arm. "Fox . . ."

His answering whisper was slow, broken by the air he was sucking in. "Be . . . all right . . . in a . . . minute . . . look around . . . iron birds?"

The sky was still empty. "Nothing," she whispered. "Some torches by the gate, guards there, I suppose. No birds."

"Help me up."

As soon as he was standing, he moved away from her to lean against one of the stone uprights. He looked down then beckoned her into the opening beside him. "Ready?"

"Ready." She stepped off the wall, felt the skin catch her and lower her gently to earth. As soon as she was down, he sent Deel after her, finally dropped himself beside them. He folded onto his knees, stayed there, unable to get up. Gleia knelt beside, helpless and frustrated; she could do nothing except stay futilely at his side. In Aab's light his face was ashen around the purpling bruises. Deel began walking up and down, six steps each way, the hem of her cloak flaring out around her strong slim legs. Across the street this section of the Market quarter was filled with the noise of the produce carts rumbling in, louder than ever because the wagons from the surroundings farms were bringing in the fall harvest of tubers and grains. There were several streets of small shops between them and the open stands of the central market, shops that were shuttered and deserted, the shutters barred also on the living quarters above them.

Shounach lifted his head, let it rest a moment against the wall. He watched Deel pacing, her body crackling with suppressed energy. Gleia met his eyes, grinned. "We better start moving again," she murmured. "Before she succumbs to spontaneous combustion."

With Deel flitting before them, running ahead and returning, they moved slowly along the narrow side street past the folded-in shops. By the time they reached the end of that street, Shounach was leaning heavily on Gleia, stumbling more and more as his weariness and pain began to overcome the drug. He stopped, looked at the busy noisy scene in front of them. "This isn't going to work," he

muttered. "Let me sit a minute. I need to think."

With a grunt of pain, he settled on the third step of a flight of stairs rising up the side of one of the shops to the family living space above. Gleia dropped beside him. Deel came swinging back and stood leaning on the shaky railing, looking down at both of them. Shounach opened his hands. The gauze showed dark stains near the crease lines. "Hand me the bag." His voice was hoarse, strained.

Gleia held it open for him while he fished inside. When he brought out the leather case, she took it from him, opened it and found the vial of pale blue wafers. She touched it, hesitated. "Just how dangerous is this stuff, Fox?"

His eyes glinted blue in the torchlight. He looked past her at the black bulk of the Lossal's house looming against the paler clouds; there was a crazy glare in his eyes for a moment, then he looked back at her and the glare faded. "About as dangerous as staying here and letting myself be caught." As he swallowed the drug, a great gong note reverberated over the city. Gleia jumped to her feet. Deel's hands tightened on the rail. She looked sick.

Shounach stood. "Deel. That an alarm?"

She shook her head. "Look." She waved an arm at the chaos developing in front of them. For a moment the drivers had frozen; now they were whipping their teams, racing for the gate giving on the wide main street, ignoring everything and everyone between them and the exit. When Deel spoke her voice was nearly drowned by the overpowering clangor of the great gong as it was beat continually, each stroke blending into the next until the air itself shuddered. She leaned closer, yelled, "Our luck's run out. That's the Knelling. The Stareyn's dead and they're sealing the city off. Once the gates are shut nobody's going to get in or out."

Shounach looked past her at the city wall, rising high above the roofs on the far side of the market. "Will there be guards walking the walls?"

Understanding wiped the despair from Deel's face. She lifted her head, her eyes glowing with excitement. "Not yet. Not yet," she chanted, then danced away only to stop and stare at the monstrous confusion in the long rectangle of the produce stalls. The noise was appalling, the wagons, carts, teams, merchants, drivers all involved in an intricate tangle. She looked back at the Juggler, raised her eyebrows. He walked slowly past her, scanned the confusion, began walking along the edge of it, heading away from the main gates, his tall form fitfully visible in the light from the market torches. Deel looked at Gleia, eyebrows going up again. Gleia shook her

head. "Don't know," she yelled. "He's got some kind of idea." They started after him, Gleia tired and feeling a bit grim, Deel excited and beginning to enjoy herself, her long legs scissoring in her dancer's swagger.

Gleia shifted the straps on her shoulder then ran after Deel. She saw the dancer take Shounach's arm and move along beside him. She sighed. *Complications*, she thought. *At least she doesn't look like the brother he killed. But is that an advantage or a disadvantage? Damn them both, let them keep each other company, I can get along without either of them.* She rubbed at the back of her neck; it was starting to prickle—as if someone was staring at her. The prickle grew to a tingling apprehension that grew stronger as they neared the wall. She walked faster, coming up on Shounach's left side. He was sweating again; the glazed look of his eyes bothered her. She touched his hand. Even through the gauze she could feel the heat in his flesh. *Fever*, she thought. She rubbed her neck again, looked up anxiously. A ragged layer of clouds rushed across the face of Aab, then past Zeb. The little moon was higher, adding its small fraction to the light pouring into the street. Gleia shivered. *Too much light.*

The gonging stopped. Behind them the confusion around the market sheds seemed to be sorting itself out. Even that noise was muted. The shutters of the dwellings above them were beginning to open. Gleia saw several heads thrust out, felt curious eyes following them.

A man called down to them, cursed when they didn't answer. The buzz of voices grew louder.

Shounach stopped in the deep shadow at the base of the great wall. He drew in a breath, let it out, looked down at Gleia. There was a question in his eyes and a great weariness. "I don't know. . . ."

"I think you can do it, Fox." She moved her shoulders restlessly. "I think you'd better. I feel itchy."

Deel tilted her head back, looked dubiously at the height of the wall, then over her shoulder at the people leaning out their windows staring at the strange three. "Better hurry; any minute now, one of those gogglers is going to think of making points by turning us in."

Shounach set his back against the wall, eased himself down until he was sitting crosslegged on the dirty stone pavement. "Get as close to the wall as you can, love."

The skin tightened round her, lifted her. It wasn't the easy glide of the inner wall. She could feel the effort he was making as she rose and paused, rose and paused.

When she finally reached the top, she stumbled again as he re-

leased her; for a moment she tottered on the edge of the wall, then sank onto her knees and looked down. He was breathing hard, his shoulders rounded, his head trembling.

Deel stepped close to the wall, rising in the same fitful increments. When she was high enough, Gleia caught her around the waist and dragged her onto the wall.

Below them the street was beginning to fill as the watchers came running down the stairs to stand about chattering and staring at the Juggler on the ground and the two women kneeling on top of the wall. As Gleia watched a man broke away from the crowd and began running down the street. She sucked in a breath, her heart bounding painfully. "Come on, Fox," she whispered. "Come on."

He began to rise slowly, his body taut with effort. He sank back a little, rose again. The crowd surged closer, excitement changing into disapproval. He continued to rise jerkily. Two men came closer, then ran at him, leaping to catch hold of his feet. He strained higher; their hands brushed his boots, then they fell back.

Gleia and Deel caught him as he rose above the wall, rolled him onto the stone beside them. Overhead the clouds thickened and darkened. As Shounach lay trembling and panting, a few drops of cold rain came splatting down. Gleia knelt beside him, the itching at the back of her neck growing and growing. She touched Shounach's face. It burned her fingers.

"He's in bad shape." Deel lifted her head, jumped to her feet and went to look at the angry muttering crowd below. "If we just had a bit of rope."

"Well, we don't." Gleia settled back on her heels and tried to pierce the growing gloom over the city. More rain fell, a short flurry of large drops. The wind was rising; it pushed the heavy material of her cafta against her body, tossing her curls about until they tickled her face. It seemed to her that she saw the torchlight reflected against bits of metal in the sky, bits of metal circling and soaring like wind-caught sparks. She fished in her pocket, found the small rod, looked up again. "Deel."

"What?" The dancer came back from the edge of the wall, the stained amber silk whipping about her legs.

"Help me move the Juggler."

The two women shifted Shounach until he was stretched out at the base of the crenellations. "Stay with him," Gleia murmured. She moved away from them, stood in the center of the wide wall, peering tautly into the darkness, the sense of danger rising like a geyser, ready to explode. She fingered the rod nervously, hoping it was the

magic she needed, afraid, terribly afraid of the demon birds, birds that were not birds, birds whose knife-like talons were wet with poison. She drew on her store of stubbornness, her anguish, and even her fear, drew on all she'd learned from the seaborne who kept longer memories of their lost technology. She held the image of her adopted father in her mind. "It's only a machine," she whispered. She heard Deel stirring behind her and ignored that. She heard shouts from the crowd, stones striking against the wall, ignored that. Kept scanning the black sky for the circling sparks, waiting for one or more of them to come closer. "The Lossal is back in his house," she said suddenly.

"What?" Deel's voice was sharp; she was strung taut again with the waiting. "How do you know that?"

"The birds are out." Gleia pointed at the flecks of crimson riding through the darkness, coasting on the surging winds. There was a strained silence behind her then she heard Shounach and Deel talking quietly, heard a scraping on the stone as the dancer helped the Juggler sit up.

"Gleia."

"I've still got the rod, Fox. You rest." She bit her lip, rubbed at her eyes. One of the sparks broke from the pattern and glided to the wall. It started toward them, skimming over the stone about five feet off the surface. She faced it, twisted the cover off the sensor and aimed the rod at the flicker of red and silver.

"Good, Vixen." Shounach's voice was calm, steady, feeding her confidence. "Don't touch the sensor yet. Wait a little . . . wait . . . now!"

Gleia touched the black spot with her forefinger, nearly dropped the rod as a beam of intensely white light about as big around as her finger cut through the air. She steadied the rod, brought the beam up until it woke glitters in the polished metal of the bird's body. She moved the beam until it touched the bird, cut across it. She gasped. The bird melted, then blew apart, fragments tinkling like distant rain on the stone. Hastily she twisted the cover back over the sensor, awed and a little frightened by the power she held in her hand.

"Help me up." Shounach's struggles brought her around. Muttering protest, Deel was propping the Juggler against the stone upright of the crenellation. He looked around. "Gleia." His eyes were glittering with fever.

She came to him, touched his face, shook her head. "Not this time. You go first, Fox. Once you're down you can bring us."

He reached for her; she backed away. "No."

Deel shivered. "Dammit, do something. We've got to get out of here."

Shounach looked past Gleia at the House. He smiled suddenly, a smile more like a snarl. "A minute more," he muttered. "A minute. Minute . . . minute . . ." He broke off, shook his head. "Right." Turning unsteadily, he stepped off the wall.

Deel gasped. "He's falling like a damn rock. Ahhh . . . all right now. He stopped himself just before he was going to splash on the ground." She glanced at Gleia. "He's waiting for you."

Gleia rubbed wearily at burning eyes. "No. You next. There's another bird coming. I have to deal with it."

Deel looked down, then at the bird. "Oh well, it'd be a quicker and easier death than the Lossal would give me." With a flourish of her arms, she stepped off the wall. A moment later Gleia heard a startled cry and knew the dancer had reached ground safely.

The second bird came more slowly than the first, wavering erratically from side to side. She couldn't keep the rod aimed at it, couldn't anticipate where it would be next. Pressing her lips together, she waited until it reached the spot where the other bird had exploded, then she touched the sensor and swung the beam in an arc, cutting through the bird, feeling an intense satisfaction as it fell apart and rained fragments on the pavement below.

She waited a moment longer, searching the sky for more of the birds, then twisted the shield back over the sensor and thrust the rod into her pocket as she ran to the opening in the stone. Shounach was leaning on Deel, both of them looking anxiously up. "Coming," she cried. She stepped off the wall. For a terrifying time she fell, the cafta ballooning up about her body, the wind whipping at her, then she felt the skin tighten around her, slowing her fall. In spite of this she landed heavily, going to her knees, the breath knocked out of her.

Deel helped her to her feet, then gasped with fear. Gleia followed her gaze and saw more iron birds circling the place where she'd been standing. She fumbled in her pocket for the rod, turned to question Shounach.

He was standing, swaying a little, the wind tugging at his matted hair, a wild glittering triumph in his fever-glazed eyes. "Shounach," she called. He didn't hear her. Or ignored her. She didn't exist for him; only the wall and the birds existed for him.

She sank to the ground, pulled her knees up against her breasts, tired of fighting, waiting now. Waiting with Shounach for whatever he expected to happen. Deel walked past her, cloak whipping about,

amber silk slapping against her long legs. Not too far from them the river was a shimmering rippling surface whispering past low stone piers toward the sea, opening below the city into a wide estuary where a number of large ocean-going ships were anchored. Smaller boats were tied up at the piers, their owners joining the crowd milling outside the gates. Deel turned. She came back and stood in front of Gleia. "One of those ships could take us anywhere. If you're worried about passage money, I've got plenty."

Gleia looked up at her, then over at Shounach. *This is the end*, she thought. *I can't drift any more.* She closed her eyes. *Shounach, Deel, or neither? Trouble is, if I take the easiest way and go on by myself, I know what my life will be like . . . day and day and day with no surprises. No pain and fear and anguish. No highs either. It could be very comfortable. I could go back and live contentedly enough with Temokeuu-my-father. And be bored to death. End up hurting the both of us. No. I turned my back on that. What's the point of going back. Deel. I like her. Friendship without the complications of sex. I've had that too. Jevati-my-sister.* She smiled affectionately as she remembered the slim silver-green sea-girl. She glanced up at Deel who had turned again and was looking out to sea. It was tempting, yet. . . . She shook her head and turned to Shounach. *There never was any real question*, she thought. *I just didn't want to admit it. I need him. I've never needed anyone before. I don't like it. It hurts. And it's hard, trying to be a companion, as he calls it. Harder than anything I've done before.* She shivered. *Scares hell out of me.* Stiffly, slowly she pushed up onto her feet and walked slowly over the stony earth to Shounach.

She touched his arm. The fever in him burned her even through the heavy material of his jacket sleeve. She looked up at him, beginning to be frightened. His intensity frightened her also; he seemed unaware of anything but the city, didn't even feel the touch of her hand, didn't even know she was there. *It's beginning*, she thought. *Madar, will I ever be able to . . .*

The sky above the city seemed to open; springing from behind the wall a blue flash fanned out, searing her eyes, covering a large portion of the sky. Almost immediately she heard an explosion; the blast deafened her. Beside her Shounach started laughing. She couldn't hear that laughter; seeing it was bad enough. She heard his words echoing in her mind like the gong strokes of the Knelling. *I hold grudges. I hold grudges a long, long time.* She saw his face when the blue ball rolled down the Ironmaster's belly to sit rocking between his legs.

He slapped his arm onto her shoulders still laughing, then she felt him sag against her; when she looked at him, the strained madness was gone from his face. He said something, but her ears were still ringing and she couldn't understand him. She swallowed, swallowed again, felt the ringing diminish. Wriggling around until she was more comfortable under his weight, she settled herself then smiled up at him. "What'd you say, Fox?"

"Coming with me?" He spoke slowly, with great difficulty.

"If you can put up with me." She hesitated, added, "It won't be easy. I . . . I get itchy."

"I know. We make a cranky pair, my Vixen." He tugged her around until they were facing the smaller piers at the far end of the line of landings. "We need a boat before I wash out. Once I crash, love, I'll be out a good long while."

With Shounach leaning heavily on her, Gleia started walking slowly to the east, angling toward the riverbank. She heard a patter of quick steps, a flurry of silk, then Deel was beside her. "You've made up your mind."

"I'm going upriver with the Juggler." She glanced at Shounach. His eyes were glassy; he was stumbling along in a daze, close to doing what he called crashing. "If we can reach the damn river."

Amber eyes narrowed, Deel moved swiftly ahead, gliding easily over the stony earth as she walked backward examining Shounach, measuring what strength he had left. Then she nodded, shifted to his other side and slid her shoulder under his arm, helping Gleia support him. "Mind if I come with you?"

The scattered flurries of rain were merging into a steady drizzle that the wind drove fitfully against their backs. Gleia looked across Shounach at Deel. "If you want." She smiled. "At least you won't be bored."

Deel burst out laughing, continued to chuckle at intervals as they slogged through the rain toward a quiet eddy where several small boats rocked unattended. As they stopped beside one of these boats, Deel glanced back at the still glowing city, then up the river. The clouds were matting heavily across the sky, blocking out moonlight and starlight until the river flowed into a heavy darkness. She chuckled again as she helped Gleia maneuver Shounach into a boat. "No, my friend. With the Juggler around, we certainly won't be bored."

In the matter of letters: keep them coming! Letters to the editor should be addressed to us at Box 13116, Philadelphia PA 19101. Letters on subscription renewals, subscription changes of address, and other subscription matters should go to Box 2650, Greenwich CT 06836. Matters for the publisher's staff—such as advertising and classified advertising rates and so on should go to Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York NY 10017.

Letters on just how well we're being distributed to newsstands have been coming in, and they've been a great help. But—we do need more of this information. If your local newsstands do—or don't—carry the magazine, we'd like to know details. Newsstand distribution information is the biggest help you can give us just now.

How long after you submit a story should you expect to see some kind of reply? With this magazine, in an overwhelming majority of cases, we respond within a couple of days—but that's a couple of days as measured from our post office back to our post office. It'll be longer, by a variable amount, when you add in transit time both ways. A general rule is: if you don't hear from us (or any other SF publisher) in about a month, send a polite note asking if the manuscript was received. Our experience is that the post office loses—completely loses—about 1 manuscript in 2,000. If it was lost on the way to us, we'll tell you we haven't heard of it and you can send another copy; and if it was lost on the way back to you, at least we can tell you more or less why we did send it back. Please understand, however, that certifying your mail is no protection against this kind of loss; and registering your mail is generally more expensive than the cost of duplicating your manuscript is worth. The one protection against loss in transit is to keep a good copy of everything you send out. Or, you can send us the good copy and keep the original for your files.

But this still leaves the question of what on Earth is the post office doing with all that lost mail—burning it to keep down their fuel bills?
—George H. Scithers

Dear George Scithers:

This is a belated thank-you letter for (of all things) a rejection slip. It is for publication if you like; sometimes it seems from your letters column that your readership consists largely of unpublished

authors. I find this hard to understand—surely I am not the only person who finds it hard to keep reading in the field after getting more and more widely rejected? Each good story saps my self-confidence: how can I compete with this? And each story I can't stand makes me angry: how could anyone print this tripe and not mine, which, whatever its faults, is not *this* bad?

And each printed form rejection slip makes me feel more and more as if editors are grisly mythical beasts, half Charon, keeping the strait gate between writers and would-be readers; and half fish that refuse to bite. That's why it is good to get a note back with a story saying what it was you liked about it and what it was you didn't like.

It also saves you time and me postage. The reason I have not yet sent you any more manuscripts is not only that I have been putting most of my energy into writing a novel (isn't everybody?) but that none of the three or four stories I have completed since you asked to see more of my work are likely to be more to your taste than the ones you thought weren't quite for *IA'sfm*.

Last of all, critical comments are valuable because they help one to grow as a writer. It is possible to agree with them, to say, here are specific faults I can fix next time; or to disagree, and then ask oneself why such a misreading on the editor's part was possible. Each way, it's a learning experience. Thanks.

Sincerely,

Millea Kenin
Oakland CA

Appreciating a creative rejection is intelligent, but expressing that appreciation is more than intelligent; it is kind.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear George and Isaac:

A few issues back you ran an editorial on the subject of rejections. I was very impressed with your views and handling of an often delicate subject. As one writer who has had some rejections from your magazine, I felt those comments from you, George, were a very nice gesture considering how busy you are.

Unfortunately, the last rejection was something altogether different and if I didn't know better, I'd swear it was from another place, not *IA'sfm*. Admittedly, I'm not very good at SF yet and my SF stories have been published in fanzines only, but I or any other

writer don't deserve the insulting printed rejection that was sent to me a while back.

I refer to the one that begins with, "I recommend you get a hard cover version of *The Elements of Style* as you will be rereading it a lot." Is this how you encourage your submitters? Surely, I'm not the only one who has received such a form response; and that's a pity. Has your magazine gotten so big that it stoops to that level? I've had rejections and acceptances from some of the finest publications and never has an editor or his associates had to insult me to make a point. Firstly, I'm a published writer, not well known but published; therefore I'm not that much of an amateur. Secondly, even if it was my first submission anywhere, do you really believe that rejections of that type are encouraging to a new writer? For your information, in spite of the curt rejection, I read the book, but only because I had bought it long before I received your "advice."

One editor I know, who accepted a story for publication two months ago, takes the time for personal comments with each submission whether or not the story has merit. I have received some criticism from him, but no time has it been in an insulting tone.

Our local writers' workshop here is brutal in their criticism, but not insulting. When an editor (and I've been one in the past) insults writers rather than criticizes, he or she should examine the reasons they became an editor in the first place. In your editorial, Isaac, you stated that you were sympathetic towards the recipients of rejections, yourself included; and I believed you. Then, isn't it somewhat hypocritical to send out such a form as I've mentioned?

As a writer and long time reader of your magazine, frankly I'm very disappointed.

Yours truly,

Vicki Carleton
Lansing MI

I think that any writer, published or unpublished, will benefit from frequent re-reading of Strunk & White's The Elements of Style. It's not a book to read once and then put aside: it must be re-read frequently, first to understand what the authors are saying, then what they mean by that, and eventually, to disagree on one point and to realize how true another point really is. "You'll be re-reading it a lot," is not a putdown; any "you" should be re-reading it a lot, for anyone who takes writing seriously will be re-reading Strunk & White a lot.

—George H. Scithers

Dear Sirs:

I have greatly enjoyed my subscriptions to *IA'sfm*. The consistent quality of the stories and the poetry are a delight. There are a few areas of particular interest.

The science articles have been uniquely informative. They seem to be written "up" to the readers instead of being written "down" to us. In spite of this, they are very readable.

The stories by new writers are very uneven. Some of them are so good, they make up for the really rotten ones. Keep publishing them. (I have enclosed an SASE for your needs and manuscript format.) Somtow Sucharitkul and Barry Longyear seem to have developed very interesting worlds to explore.

Please do not ever print another serial. As is usually the case, the second part of your one previous attempt was the one that got lost in the mail.

The good doctor has quite a sense of humor. It shows in the letters and their responses. Does he still have to wear his corrective hat indoors?

Yours truly,

Clifton D. Baird
Tempe AZ

Sorry, I've split all my corrective hats. I can't even get through doorways anymore.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sirs:

I wish to comment on a section of your excellent magazine that has apparently been overlooked: namely, your book reviews. **THEY ARE FANTASTIC!**

Baird Searles has just exactly the right touch for book reviews. He is commendably brief in most cases, highly intelligent and perceptive in all cases, and has a refreshing sense of humor which is sprinkled throughout the column.

Book reviews, in general, are either long and incredibly boring, or short and exasperatingly uninformative. Seldom can you find one that is the proverbial happy medium, nor can you find many that are actually *entertaining* to read.

So, gentlemen, if I were you, I would get Mr. Searles to put his signature on a life-time contract. He seems to be an extremely rare,

endangered species.

Most sincerely,

Ellen Lane
Route 1
McLeansboro IL 62859

I agree with you whole-heartedly—to the point, in fact, of writing an editorial on the subject.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mister Scithers and Dr. Asimov,

As a charter subscriber I would like to say that I have enjoyed every issue of *IA'sfm* I have received. However, there are some aspects of the magazine that could be improved, so here are some questions and comments.

First, while going through my back issues I noticed that the recent issues have fewer pages than previous ones. What happened to those extra 16 pages?

Second, I noticed that if you cut down the borders on the mailing labels they would be only slightly larger than that computer code on the cover. Thus, if the labels were placed over the code (if you are mailing the issue the code is not needed anyway), they would not obscure the art work on the cover. Speaking of art work, I applaud your policy of keeping illustrations to a minimum and thus allowing the reader to use his/her own imagination to visualize the scenes. It is also admirable of you to encourage new unpublished authors.

I will be a sophomore at Boston University next semester and have heard that the good Dr. has taught courses here before. This prompts me to ask whether he will have time in the future to teach here again and, if so, would it be a course concerning science fiction or biochemistry (S.F., I hope, since chemistry is not one of my best subjects)?

Thank you and keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

David Anderson
Pequannock NJ

Alas, I don't actively teach at the University, or get paid—though I'm a full member of the faculty. You'll find the whole story in my autobiography.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sir:

Please send me a copy of your manuscript format and story needs. (Business before criticism.)

My thanks to Dr. Asimov's editorial on serials. It has prompted me to an action that I have been putting off for 5+ years (id est, write those *short* stories I've been kicking around in my head). His editorials are an infinite source of inspiration, information, and insight. More than any other section of the magazine, his editorials should be expanded (a few more pages each month from such a prolific writer could be easily accomplished and would be *greatly* appreciated).

Sincerely,

James D. Taylor
Houston TX

I appreciate the thought but please. Everyone says "What's a few more words, Asimov?" and by the time I try to please everybody, there's no time left to breathe.

—Isaac Asimov

NEXT ISSUE

This issue of *IA'sfm* will be our last monthly issue. No, we're not folding—just the opposite, in fact. Our next issue will be called the 19 January 1981 issue, because we're going to a 13-issue-per-year schedule. This means that *IA'sfm* (and our sister publication, *Analog*) will be appearing on your newsstands and in your mailboxes every four weeks. To kick off our new schedule, our 19 January 1981 issue will be one of our most exciting ever. The cover story is "Island Man" by R. A. Wilson, with a lovely cover painting by David Mattingly. In addition, we'll have stories and articles by James Gunn, Larry Niven, Isaac Asimov, Martin Gardner, and John M. Ford. On sale 23 December. Don't miss it!

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